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The Power Of Player Agency

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
@GI_AndyMc

Shared worlds are at the heart of many of the games I love. I still believe single-player games will never go away, but I also understand the draw for both gamers and publishers to persistent worlds where people can return again and again as the world and the player evolves. A place where friends can play together cooperatively or competitively. A place where there is space within the authored content for emergent gameplay to happen.

Those rules can take hold in a lot of ways, and ideally we want game developers to explore that space and try to find new ways to engage us. Seeing a multiplayer behemoth like Call of Duty change directions in response to the change in player behavior after groundbreaking titles like PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds and Fortnite is not a bad thing – it is the smart thing to do. The games we love and publishers who make them must change. Breath of the Wild energized Zelda because it found new ways to engage the player. Bungie went from Halo to Destiny. This month's cover story is yet another company that knows it must evolve and find a way to capitalize on its foundations in new ways. Anthem is a bold change for the storied developer BioWare, but one that needs to be taken. It doesn't close the door on the single-player stories the company has been known for for decades; rather, it opens the door to new ways to engage the player and tell new stories.

I heard it said once that the stories the player can create will always be more powerful than even the best-written story because of player agency. Yes, the story in-game matters, but when the players create the story by participating in a massive chase in Grand Theft Auto, by making the perfect play to be the last survivor in Fortnite, or by gathering your friends and taking down giant raid bosses in Destiny, you start to see why games have evolved the way they have.

I look forward to seeing how BioWare makes it all work in Anthem, and in all the other games coming out this year and all the years that follow as developers and publisher continue to redefine what games can be, and how they can put the player at the heart of the experience.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

0718

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Our cover story examines how BioWare explores a new type of storytelling in this shared-world shooter. ***by Joe Juba***

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The collectible covers for Anthem, featuring all four javelin exo-suits

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Annapurna has quietly become a powerful player in the world of independent games by publishing titles like What Remains of Edith Finch. We look at its bright future.

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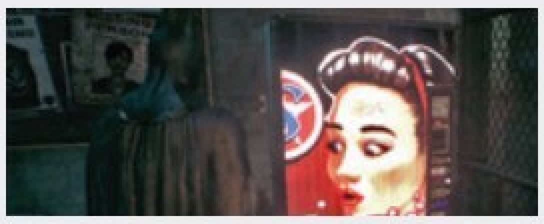
The box-office success of Black Panther led us to ask, where is his video game adaptation? He deserves an interactive experience just as much as heroes like Batman and Spider-Man.



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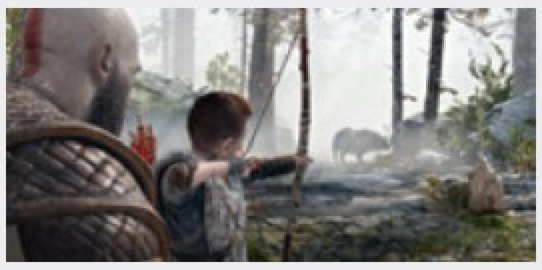
This political science professor has archived 2,000-plus video game soda machines. We asked him, why?



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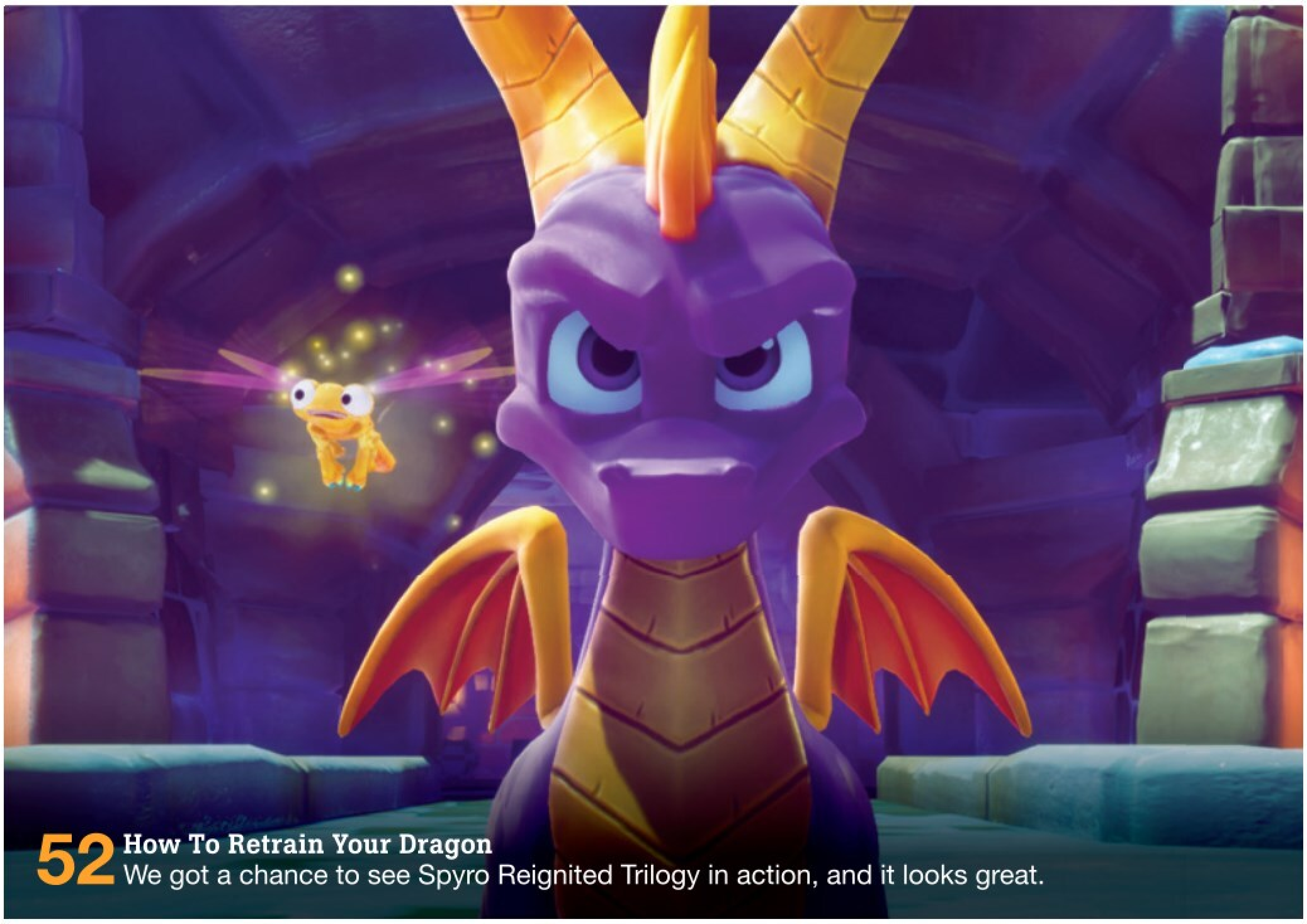

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Call of Duty is losing its campaign, but it's gaining even more zombies and battle royale.

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After the success of Battlefield 1's World War I setting, DICE is heading back to World War II.

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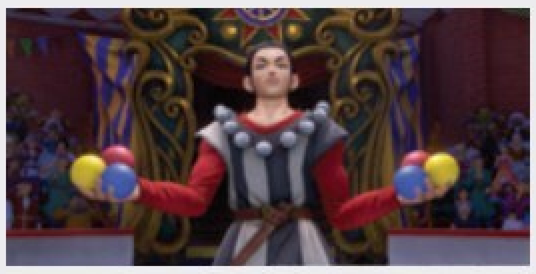

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Dragon Quest has never quite found its audience outside of Japan. Maybe the 11th time is the charm?

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The developers behind Theme Hospital and Fable are back for more medical shenanigans.

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Id Software is making its triumphant return to the Rage universe, and the open-world experts at Avalanche (Just Cause, Mad Max) are helping out.

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Did Blighttown finally get fixed? Yeah, and it's great.

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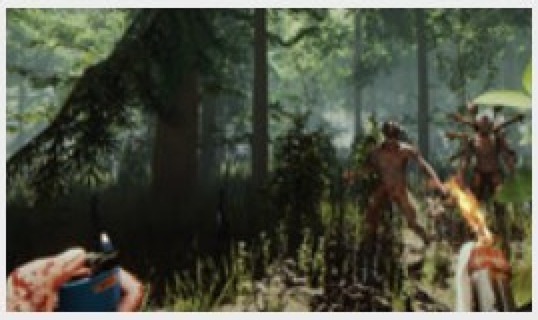
Laser League offers a fun local (and online) multiplayer experience with a sci-fi edge.



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Check out what horrors and mysteries set The Forest apart from the rest of the survival genre.

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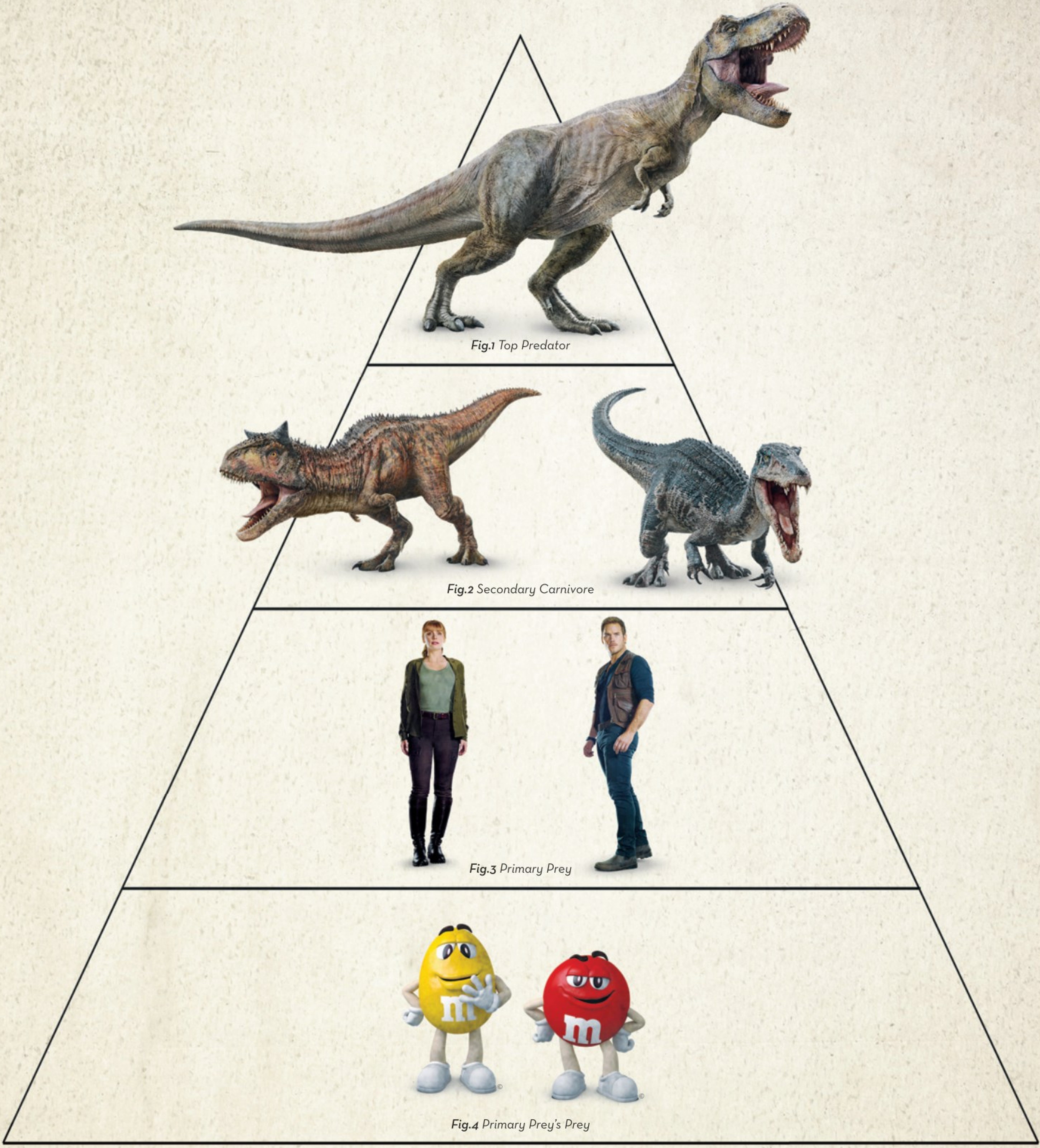

Fig.1 *Top Predator*

Fig.2 *Secondary Carnivore*

Fig.3 *Primary Prey*

Fig.4 *Primary Prey's Prey*

THE JURASSIC WORLD FOOD CHAIN

M&M'S® aren't the only thing on the menu June 22

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feedback

Marvel's beloved web-slinger was a popular topic this month, as was Infarcer's reviled insult-spewer. We also give more props to our gaming elders – they've earned it!

Satisfied With The Swing?

I have been rereading the Spider-Man cover story (issue 301) and am thoroughly hyped. The game looks incredible and I would only trust Insomniac for something like this. However, after rereading, it occurred to me that one detail about the gameplay is missing: if the web-slinging physics are realistic and fun in their own right. Forget diving, quick slings, and whether or not you stop when you hit a wall – are the core physics fun? After replaying Spider-Man 2 and not doing anything other than swinging around the city, that's the real million-dollar question I want answered.

Peter Dimopoulos
via email

Have no fear, Peter. While we won't know how the full Spider-Man experience will fare until we play the final game, our hands-on time convinced us that the fundamental web-swinging mechanics are as fun – if not more fun – than Spider-Man 2. For more of our thoughts and a boatload of extra details about the game, head to gameinformer.com/spiderman.

Infarcer Infatuation

I was so excited to see Just OK Luigi Odyssey featured on this year's Game Infarcer! I can't wait to chase my psychotic pants around in an open world. Also, I noticed that just about every game in Infarcer included a battle royale mode – I can finally sate my appetite for having 100 soccer players (and zombies!) kick the living crap out of each other on a soccer field! One question, though: How does Darth Clark continue to look so youthful after all these years? He doesn't look like he's aged a day. Amazing!

Logan Williams
via email

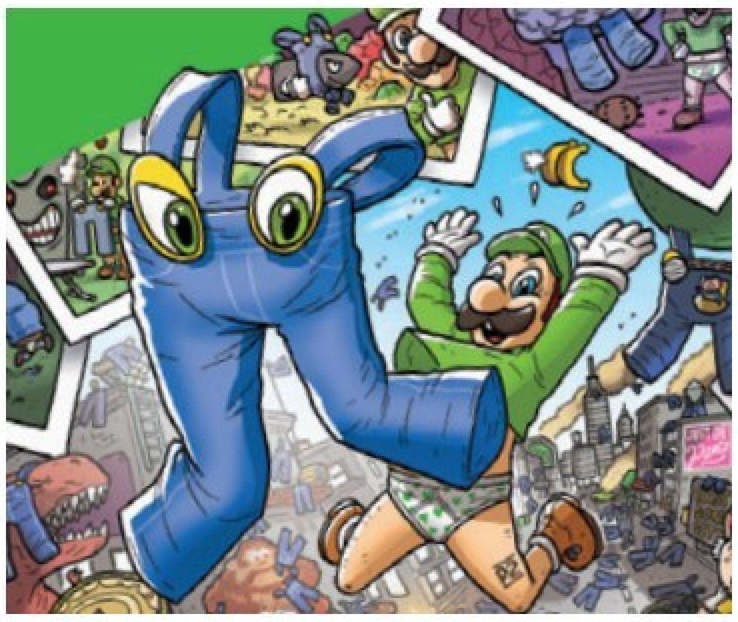
Thank you, thank you for this year's Game Infarcer; my dad running out of the bathroom in a panic to tell me that Nintendo was giving Mario extra nipples is the best thing that's happened to me in a long time.

Carmen Hewko
via email

Darth Clark's latest Game Infarcer had me laughing on the floor so much due to its unique jokes. However, I feel like Darth overused the battle royale joke way too many times. The only real funny battle royale joke was the "BUBG" shirt Phil Spencer was wearing, but it seems like everywhere else he just copy and pasted the words "battle royale." Maybe next year, take this bit of advice: Don't overuse a joke that's only funny once.

Jason Tu
via email

Darth Clark's annual contribution proved a hit once again this year, even if confused readers now express their indignation via social media instead of email. As for the comedic advice – so you're telling us you felt like battle royale was just being blindly copied and pasted into every game, huh? You don't say…



Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Single-Player Still Sells

So with God of War garnering huge critical acclaim, will game devs still consider making triple-A single-player games? Especially with games like Overwatch, PUBG, and EA's justification in shutting down Visceral studios and their single-player Star Wars game? I hope they do; multiplayer is fun and all, but single-player games with great storylines are one of the reasons I still play. It's amazing to be drawn into a story with great characters and backgrounds and experience their journeys. I don't want those to be cast aside and forgotten.

Timothy Seballos
via email

Few trends have been more prolific than gamers and critics alike prematurely lamenting the death of single-player games – and we're still no closer to that bleak future coming to fruition. While the IPs you mentioned probably won't stray from their multiplayer roots anytime soon, there will always be talented and driven developers in the industry who want to focus on compelling storytelling. God of War's financial success proves gamers are still just as interested in those single-player experiences as well.

The Greatest Generation

I just saw the "Respect Your Elders" letter in Feedback (issue 301) and thought it was great. I am almost 72 years old and have been a gamer since there was only a dot bouncing back and forth on screen. I still have all my old consoles: Atari 2600, NES, Super NES, N64, Wii, Dreamcast, Xbox 360, and PS1-PS4, along with hundreds of games and controllers. My biggest gripe over the decades of playing is the inclusion of very bad language, nudity, and outright viciousness against innocent civilians and law enforcement in some games. I have also found some very good games just too hard to complete, and that is a real shame for me and the game designer, as I am missing out on their art. I am glad to see most games include various difficulty levels now, which helps me – my reflexes and mind still work well, but age is taking its toll. Many seniors are still avid gamers, so I hope the industry does not forget us. So many games, so little time left to play.

Respectfully Submitted,
Charles Robertson

To add to your "Respect Your Elders" responses, I am the rarest of the rare: a 66-year-old female gamer who started earning my spurs on an Atari 2600. After a few years pretending to be a grown up, I got back into gaming in a big way. I have played a lot of games since I bought my first 360. I've racked up all the Assassin's Creed games, including the offshoots, and have three level-400 guardians in the first Destiny and am close to my third level-335 guardian in Destiny 2. Growing up is a state of mind – "As long as the bills are paid, let the games begin!" is my motto.

Diana Pierce
via email

We weren't expecting to be inundated with letters from elder gamers this month, but we love getting them; not only are they the most polite responses we receive, but they're a heartening reminder that video games are truly for everyone. The next time you feel compelled to tell a sob story about how awful modern games have become, remember that there are gamers out there who have been playing a lot longer than you and still find plenty more to love with each passing year. In short, be more like them!

Short Answers To Readers' Continued Top 300 Questions:

"Why isn't Forza on the Top 300 list and higher than Gran Turismo?"

Because it's not as good?

"How in the name of Joel did you put Overwatch, Skyrim, and Minecraft above The Last of Us?"

Let's chalk it up to a fugue state.

"Would Shenmue have made the list if it was the Top 400 instead?"

Come back in 8.1 years to find out!

Question Of The Month:

Forget July 4th fireworks – which video game has the best explosions, and why?

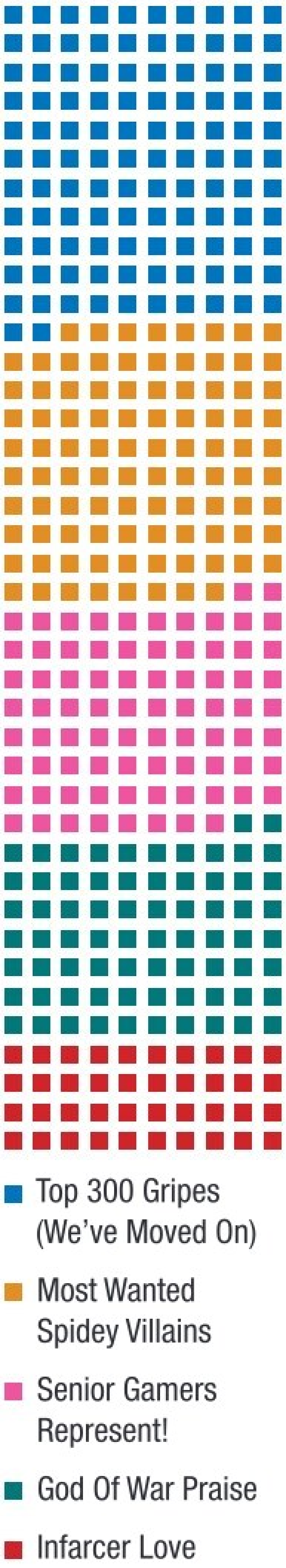
gi spy

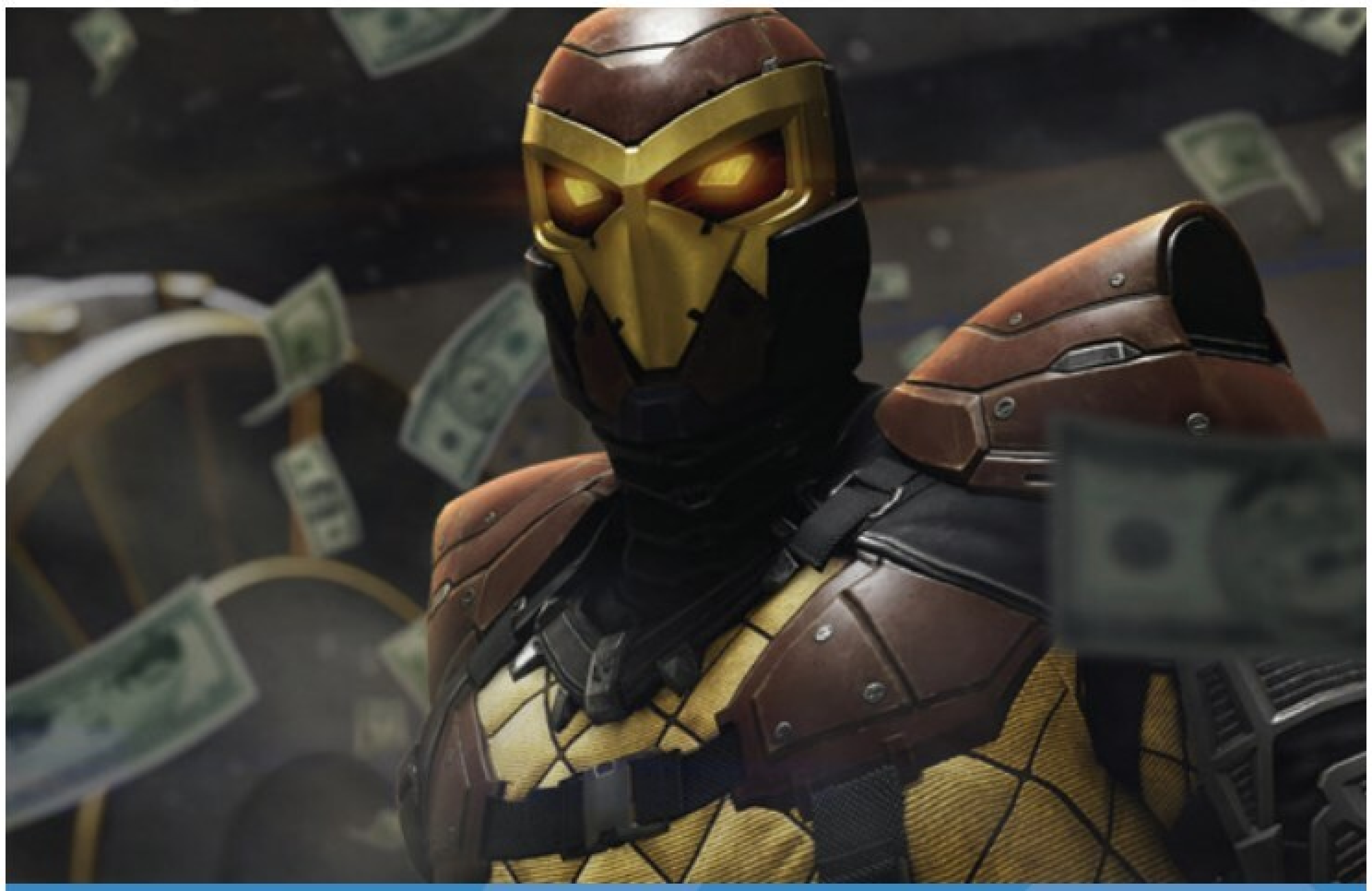
BIOWARE
A DIVISION OF EA

(Left) BioWare's Mark Darrah, Jon Warner, and Mike Gamble are so excited about Anthem they were fighting to show it off – literally! **(Right)** Former Maxis developers Chris Hecker, Alex Hutchinson, Caryl Shaw, and John Cimino were chatting at a GDC party. Spore 2 confirmed!

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind





Say Hello To The Bad Guy

In issue 301, we asked readers what villain they most want to see in Insomniac's Spider-Man. Here are some of the responses, after weeding out D.C. villains – come on guys, that's Comic Book 101!

I think that Carnage needs to be included in this game simply because at this point he is becoming a lesser known Spider-Man villain. We have seen an abundance of the Green Goblin and Venom, but absolutely nothing regarding the other villain infected by an alien symbiote. Fighting him in the original PlayStation was a high point in my childhood that I would love to relive again.

Dakota Capps

Okay, okay, call me an uncultured swine or whatever, but Venom just has to be in the new Spider-Man! Just think about it! He has almost the same powers as Spidey, except he's more violent and less controlled. Maybe he could tie into the new October movie. Also, what if you unlocked a symbiote costume for beating him? I'm just saying it would be cool.

Lucas Kruger

One long forgotten Spider-Man villain I'd like to see in the new game is Funny Bunny. Dressed in a full bunny costume, she steals Easter baskets because when she was a child, a bully sat on hers. Truly a tragic and complex figure.

Royce Miller

Game Over?

I've been paying close attention to coverage of Last of Us Part II and was wondering if you think Naughty Dog will soon change their ways and put the sequel on Xbox One? Being a relatively young gamer (I am 14), I'm becoming interested in more hardcore and violent games. I beat The Last of Us on easy mode at my uncle's house and was immediately fascinated by the story of this gore-no-bore type game. I wanted to get it for the Xbox One, but later found out that it was a PS4 exclusive. I was bummed because I'm looking forward to the next game, but am worried that it's going to be an exclusive again. You should go straight to Sony and tell them that they need more console variety. They are killing us Xbox One gamers that can't get our hands on these classic games!

Elias Soto
via email

Hoo boy, is "gore-no-bore" a real term kids are using these days? Regardless, we're guessing Sony isn't losing a whole lot of sleep over the exclusivity pain they're causing Xbox One owners – in fact, as much as it sucks for us gamers, it's kind of the entire point of exclusive titles in the first place. On the bright side, you're too young to be playing M-rated games anyway, so think of it as Sony's attempt to do you a solid and prevent you from getting grounded!

DETROIT
BECOME HUMAN

(Left) Kim gave David Cage the Voight-Kampff test after checking out Detroit: Become Human. Luckily, he passed! **(Right)** Shea asked Splatoon 2 producer Hisashi Nogami all the nerdy lore questions we could think of, but we couldn't stump him. Well played, Nogami!

(continued on page 10)

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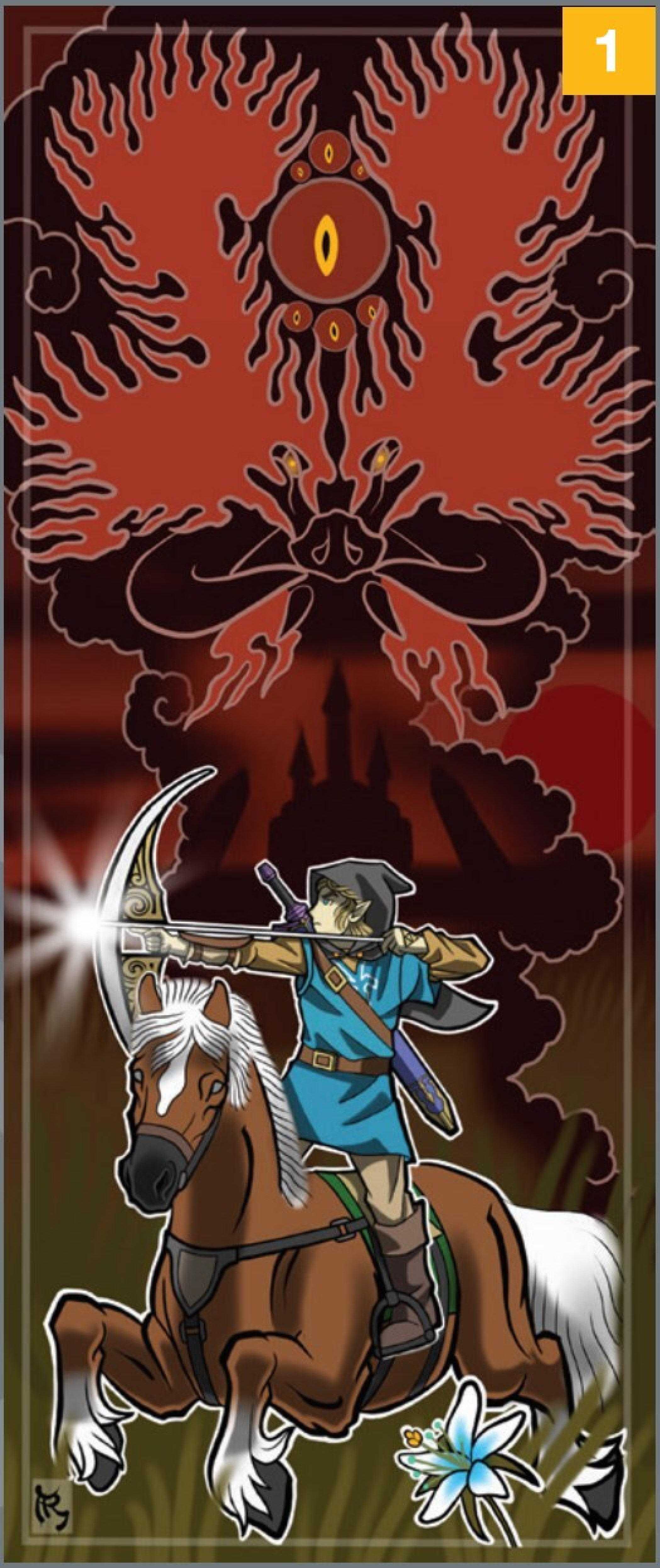


WINNER

1 Patrick Ross

What are you aiming at, Link? He's right above you!

2 Tracarris Wince

Nice toads and turtles, Tracarris!

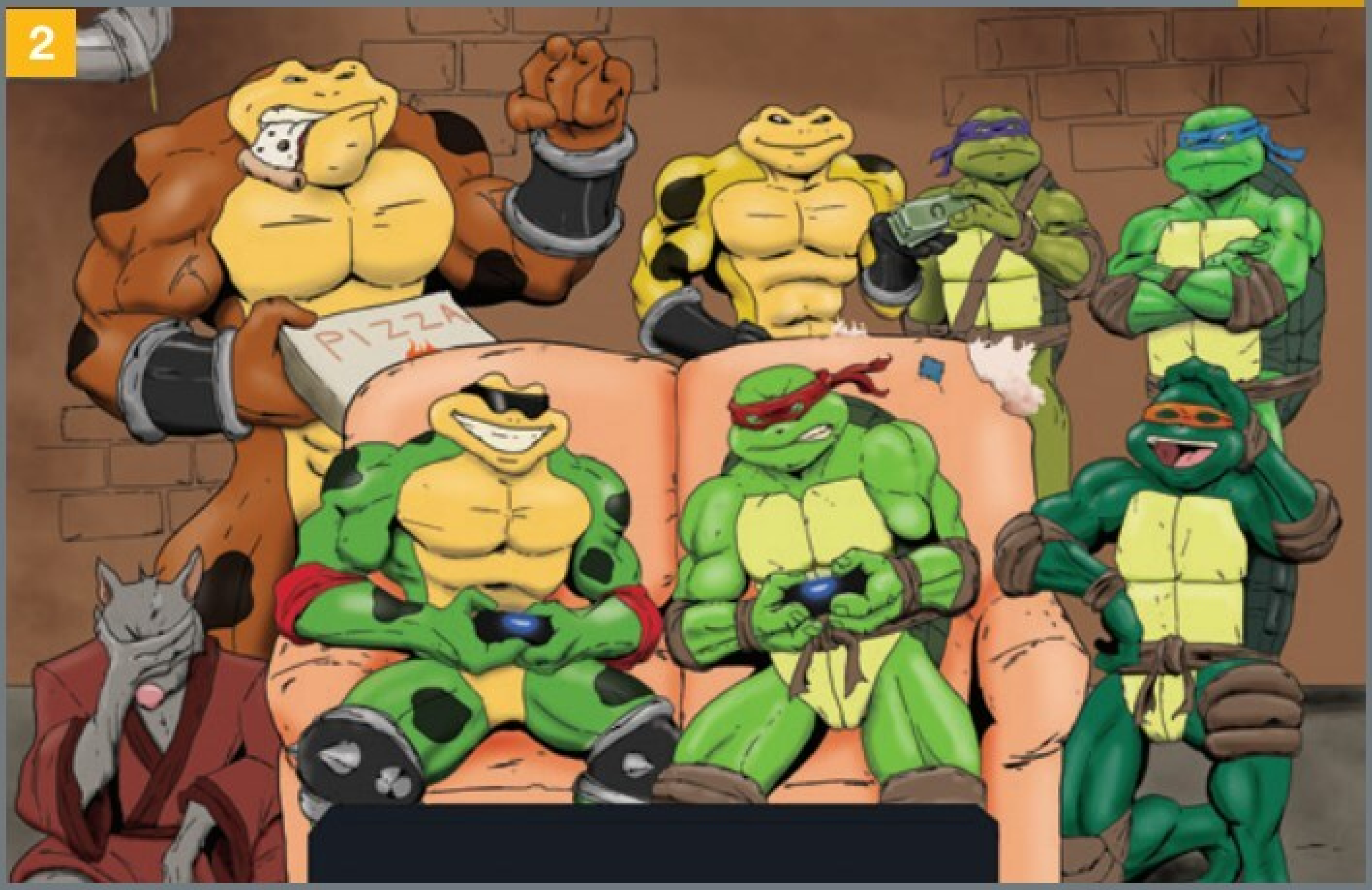
3 Dresden Simmons

Just when you thought Carbuncle couldn't get any cuter.

4 Jayce Taylore

Aaaand now we're hungry for cupcakes.

2



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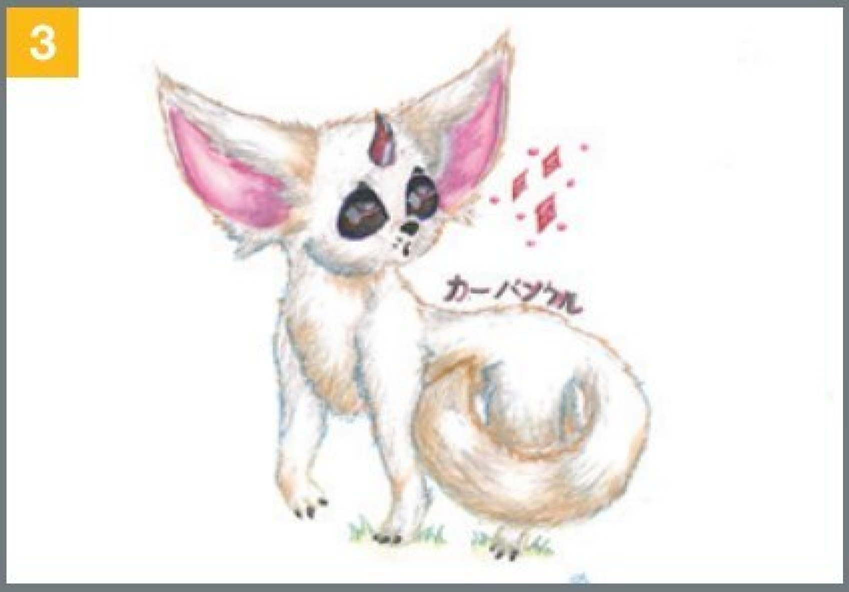

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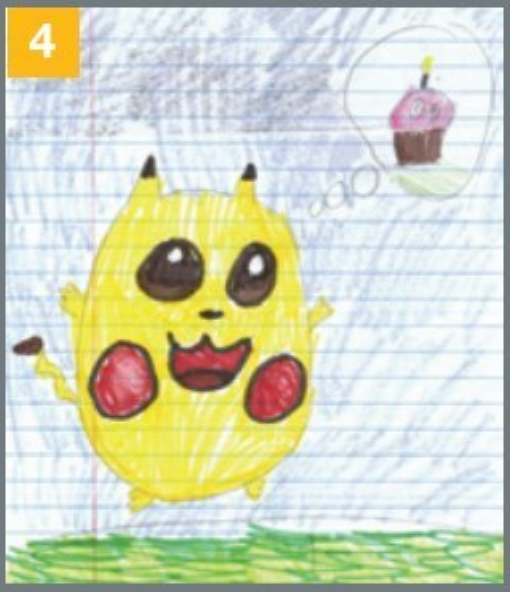

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(Left) Ben Hanson practiced his selfie skills with Easy Allies Podcast hosts Kyle Bosman, Brandon Jones, and Daniel Bloodworth. Clearly, he still needs work. **(Right)** Jon Bowman, Joey Thurmond, and Robbie Key were certainly the most unique interns G.I. has had in a while. Thanks for all the hard work, guys!

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1. TAKE THE FIRST SYLLABLE OF YOUR FIRST NAME.

2. ADD THE FOLLOWING, BASED ON YOUR BIRTH MONTH:

JANUARY: CALAMO
FEBRUARY: ODACTYL
MARCH: OTYRAN
APRIL: IGUANO
MAY: DROMEO
JUNE: BRACHIO
JULY: ANEMO
AUGUST: OSAURUS
SEPTEMBER: OPRENO
OCTOBER: OSALTYL
NOVEMBER: OLODON
DECEMBER: ODRACO

3. ADD THIS TO THE END, BASED ON THE FIRST LETTER OF YOUR LAST NAME:

A – Ch0mps
B – TANK
C – Roooars
D – CH3W
E – THR4SH
F – Cruuush
G – N00b
H – xxSL4SHxx
I – R0MP
J – Yumm
K – sw00PS
L – Sw33t
M – D1GS
N – CaMp5
O – SpLaSh
P – Rexx
Q – SN4PS
R – mmmash
S – SN00Z3
T – 5harp
U – J4WS
V – SMASH
W – crunch
X – xStretch
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Z – Dashhh

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A New Ally For Indies

Annapurna Pictures' expansion into games gives artistic projects new life

T

The first time the games industry was abuzz about Annapurna Interactive, many wondered who they were and where they came from. What Remains of Edith Finch, an adventure game that intertwines interactivity and storytelling in astounding ways, quickly put the publisher on the map. Other critically acclaimed titles from Annapurna followed, including the hand-painted puzzler Gorogoa and the emotionally-charged visual novel Florence. Shrouded in mystery, Annapurna Interactive became an alluring enigma and continues to turn heads in the industry with artistic releases that challenge convention.

Following the likes of Devolver Digital and Double Fine Productions, Annapurna Interactive is part of a relatively new brand of "indie publishers" that give start-ups a new way to flourish with dedicated funding, marketing, and production. The publisher handpicks talented developers, puts faith in their vision, and gives them the means to succeed without stifling creativity or heavy-handedly steering a project in an undesirable direction. This approach makes the developers they work with still feel independent.

Annapurna has a strong line-up that continues to bring potential gems into the spotlight. We visited Annapurna's studio in Santa Monica, where we played an assortment of upcoming games and met with the video game division's small team. This exclusive visit pulled back the curtains, showcasing how the publisher operates and what makes it special.

by Elise Favis

A Storytelling Studio

From the outside, Annapurna Pictures' studio is easy to miss. It's a nondescript building without any signboards or logos, giving no hint to onlookers that anything interesting is beyond its cloudy glass doors. As I walked up to the entrance, I wondered if I had the correct address. Stepping in, I got the sense that only a handful of outsiders get to see what's inside. I was later told that I was one of the few members of the press to visit and that a full day at the studio dedicated to coverage was a "first" for the team.

The studio feels almost cavernous, with a tall ceiling and a wide-open central space. Beside the front desk, DVD cases are carefully stacked to create a gigantic 'A' with the different boxes' colors, presenting an impressive display. Despite it feeling architecturally cavernous, the atmosphere is friendly and homey, with several lounges, pictures of staff on the walls held together by clothes pins and string, and movie posters on every corner.

One wall is filled with quotes from famous storytellers like Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde. It serves as a reminder that Annapurna Pictures, above all else, is a studio that puts storytelling first.

"A lot of our games are heavy on emotion and stories," says Annapurna Interactive executive Nathan Gary. "There's certain things that are universal between storytelling, film, and TV."

Annapurna Interactive is led by eight full-time employees, who work elbow-to-elbow in a small room located in Annapurna Pictures' film studio. The team has access to a theater to hold playtest sessions and an upper room that can be accessed with a wooden ladder. Almost like an attic, you enter the upper area through a square entryway into a space designed like a tree. With a grass green carpet, beanbags, and deep brown wooden walls, it's a cozy space with a TV in the middle.

Although Annapurna Interactive is largely run by these eight individuals, the team says they engage with the film team "all the time." Everyone in the room has overlap with other departments in the company, to the point where they call themselves an "amorphous blob of storytellers."

This is especially the case for Telling Lies, the next game from Her Story creator Sam Barlow that Annapurna is publishing. Due to its live-action nature, the team is constantly working with its film department on the project. "There has been a lot of interactions especially on that project because it is live action," says executive Neale Hemrajani. "So there's been an opportunity to integrate even further with the film side."

Annapurna Interactive is far from the only film company to jump into video game publishing. LucasArts, Fox Interactive, and Disney Interactive Studios have had similar expansions, however none of these studios still exist.

What makes Annapurna sure it won't fall down the same path? According to its team, Annapurna tries to handle things differently than big publishers by putting faith in the little guy, fostering lasting relationships with developers, and respecting an artist's vision – all to publish indie gems they believe in.

A Close Collaboration

After speaking with both Annapurna and the developers they work with, it's obvious that transparency is important to both sides. With much of Annapurna Interactive's team having worked at Sony Santa Monica previously, many have hands-on experience and have already cultivated relationships with indie designers through the years.

"Something that was super important to us, even when we were back at Sony Santa Monica, is having these relationships with these developers and fostering that. It's something we felt is important to carry forward," says Annapurna Interactive executive Deborah Mars.

The developers, from Wattam's Keita Takahashi to Donut County's Ben Esposito, had unflinchingly positive things to say about Annapurna, with the biggest sentiment being that working with them is similar to collaborating with a like-minded developer.

"What's been most interesting is that their sensibilities really align with ours," says Ashen

Who Is Annapurna?

Founded in 2011 by filmmaker and billionaire Megan Ellison, Annapurna Pictures quickly became a driving force in Hollywood film for auteur-led projects. With an impressive list of award-winning films such as *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Her*, and *The Master*, it's clear that Annapurna looks for passion projects and avant-garde ideas.

This is a philosophy that extends to its video game publishing subsidiary, Annapurna Interactive, which is making a name for itself by picking out niche titles from talented developers that produce noteworthy work in indie spaces, but who are more obscure in the industry as a whole.

Annapurna Pictures expanded its studio two years ago to focus on more than film, eventually veering into video game publishing.

"What was first only Annapurna Pictures essentially became more of a studio that now has pictures, television, interactive, marketing, and distribution," executive Neale Hemrajani says. "And Megan [Ellison] is constantly looking for new ways to expand that even further, like how we can tell stories in new ways."

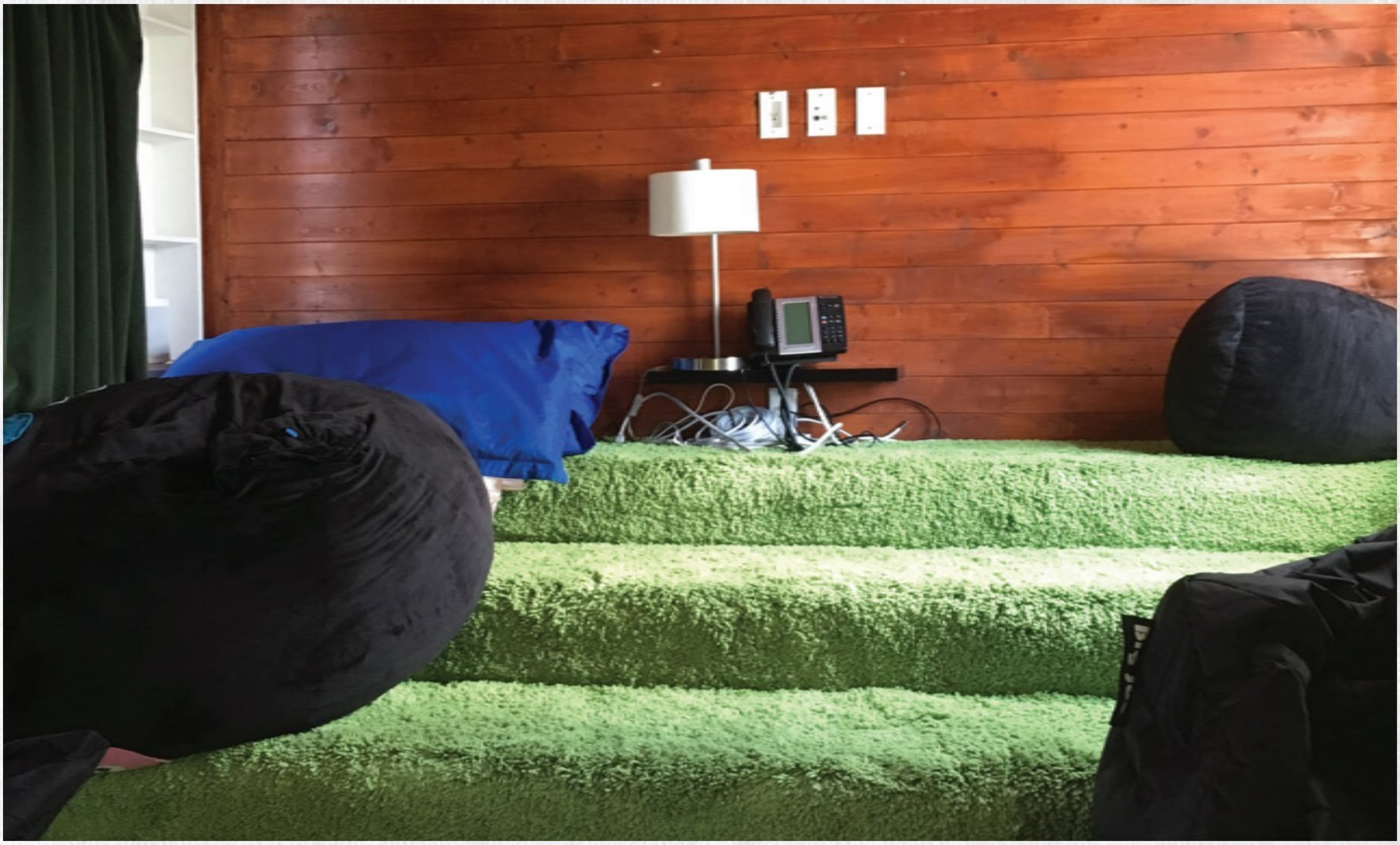
Described as a "huge gamer" by the Interactive team, Ellison had long wanted her studio to have a dedicated division for video games. Ellison built a team that is largely made up of former Sony Santa Monica employees, who know the business inside-out and have spent years working with independent designers on games such as Journey.

Is Taking Risks Profitable?

Unlike most publishers, many of Annapurna's games are difficult to ascribe a conventional genre to. The developers they work with tend to take design risks, presenting ideas that triple-A publishers may never consider due to low profitability prospects. Although Annapurna declined to comment on game sales and finances, the developers they work with believe the publisher is more concerned with making memorable interactive experiences.

Aurora44's creative director Derek Bradley, who is collaborating with Annapurna Interactive for the RPG Ashen, says, "Their approach is about making good games; it's not necessarily about monetizing."

OUTER WILDS
NEW EXPEDITION
PLAYER PROFILE
GAME SETTINGS
GRAPHICS SETTINGS
EXIT GAME



creative lead Derek Bradley. "When we talk to them about the game, it feels like talking to another developer and not a publisher."

Annapurna Interactive has a group-centric philosophy for how it operates. In the tight-knit group, communication is everything, to the point where they use a single email address to communicate with developers and check in on studios on a weekly basis.

"Everybody is exposed to everything [with the email]," Mars says. "If someone isn't here, then someone else can pick it up and respond to a developer about something; there's full transparency."

Sharing Their Vision

Annapurna Interactive is making a name for itself in the games industry, and one of its biggest trademarks is how it strives to respect a developer's initial vision. It's something the developers themselves are vocal about – Annapurna steers them in a productive direction without meddling with the work itself.

"They care about what I'm trying to do," Esposito says. "They care about the vision of the game and they don't want to influence it at all."

"We would never demand or force someone to change something in their game," Gary says. "We have productive but heated conversations about things, but that's a healthy part of the creative process."

Asking Annapurna Interactive where it sees themselves years down the line, the answer is "right here." With a commitment toward wanting to expand society's idea of video games' capabilities and believing wholeheartedly in its developer's artistic directions, Annapurna Interactive is excited to continue fostering these relationships and growing their repertoire of games that aren't only memorable for their content, but also for the ambitious risks they take.

Annapurna's Artistic Games On The Horizon

The Annapurna Interactive team has diverse tastes, leading them to take on distinctive projects that have a strong artistic vision. The studio has published award-winning games, and its upcoming projects hold promise for continuing that trend. Here are our hands-on experiences after spending time with five of Annapurna's future projects.

More Projects To Look Out For

During our trip, we went hands-on and saw several demos for Annapurna Interactive's slew of upcoming games. Here's more of what we saw and what we thought.

Kentucky Route Zero TV Edition

Platform: *PS4, Xbox One, Switch*
Developer: *Cardboard Computer*
Release: *2018*

Cardboard Computer is collaborating with Annapurna Interactive to bring the celebrated adventure game to Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One. It will include all acts, including the fifth and final one. This is Kentucky Route Zero's first console launch.

Telling Lies

Platform: *TBA*
Developer: *Sam Barlow*
Release: *TBA*

Sam Barlow's follow-up to Her Story, Telling Lies is an interactive live-action experience. Told as a political thriller in modern day with heavy influences of 1970s cinema, Telling Lies is ambitious in a similar way Her Story was in that it tells its story in a genre-bending, unique way. With Annapurna backing the project, the project has higher production values and its (soon to be announced) Hollywood casting thanks to the company's film division.

The Artful Escape

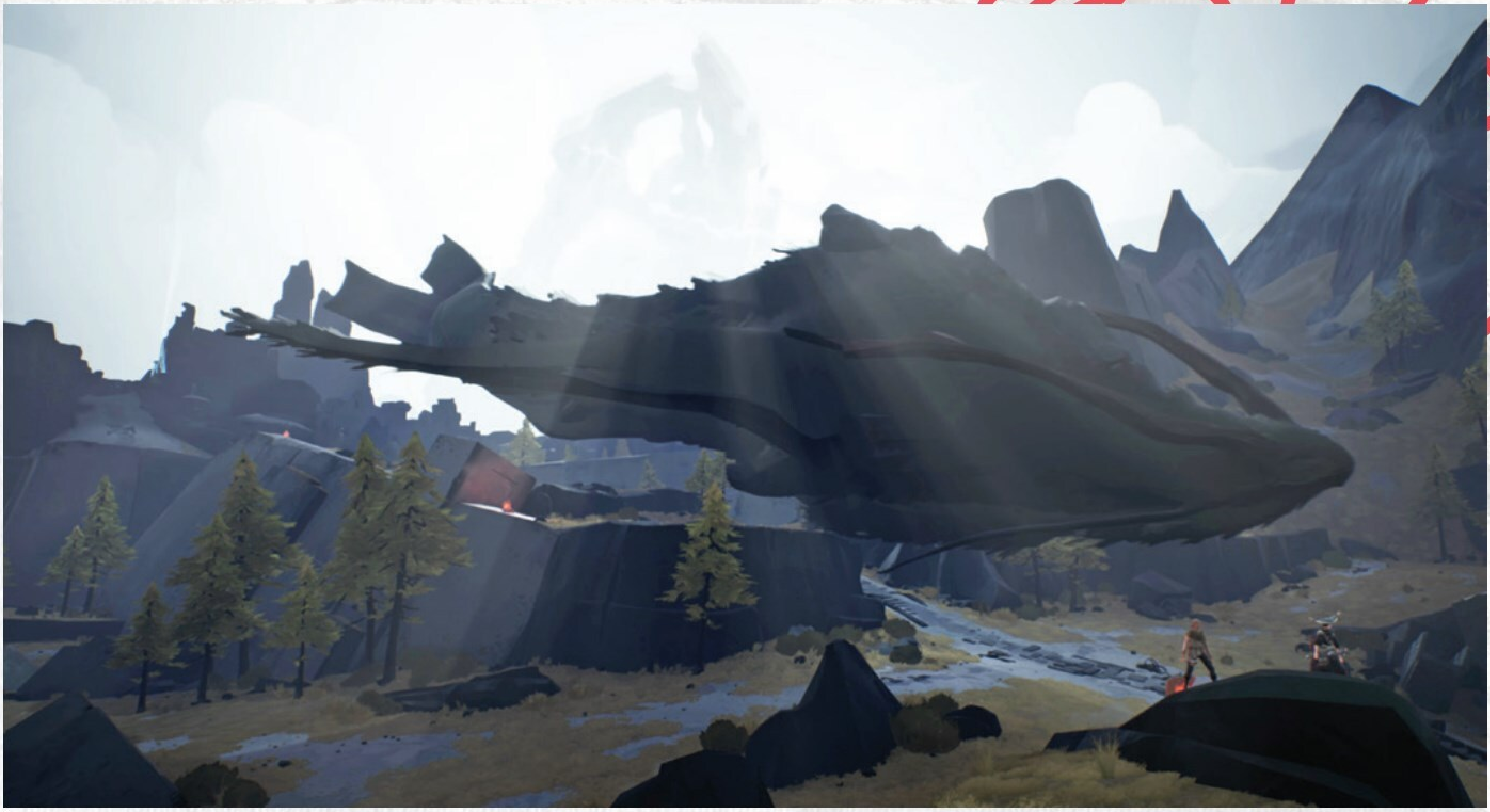
Platform: *Xbox One, PC*
Developer: *Beethoven & Dinosaur*
Release: *2018*

The Artful Escape is like a musical fever dream. Playing as a young musician, this rock opera adventure has you attempt to find your stage persona as you roam a colorful multiverse and explore the cosmos.

Two Unannounced Titles

Release: *TBA*

Annapurna Interactive has two more unannounced games on the horizon, with reveals coming soon.



Ashen

Platform: *Xbox One, PC* ***Developer:*** *Aurora44* ***Release:*** *2018*

First announced at E3 2015, Ashen intrigued us with its stunning yet gloomy teaser, portraying a dimly lit landscape filled with fearsome monsters. This action/RPG has popped in and out of the public eye since then, and is finally heading toward a 2018 release.

Ashen takes place in a dark open world, where clouds of ash obscure sunlight. A lone wanderer seeks to save his home as darkness threatens to destroy everything. In our hands-on time, we explored parts of the bleak but mesmerizing terrain, fought a difficult spider-like boss, and uncovered mysteries with lead developer Bradley playing alongside us.

One of the most striking elements about Ashen is its passive multiplayer, which is executed similarly to Journey. As you traverse, you may come across another player to adventure with. However, you can't directly chat or interact with them outside of simple emotes. Instead, you silently explore the world together, fight side-by-side, and share emergent experiences. This can be with a stranger you find at random or with a friend you invite.

"Multiplayer is the core of the game," Bradley says. "We want to try to make genuine experiences for players. There are no lobbies or anything like that. It happens the same way you meet someone in real life: they walk past you and you decide to talk to them or hang out with them."

During the demo, I enjoyed the simple connection that fighting alongside another player provided. Having a player companion with you bolsters your chances of success. For example, if one falls in battle, the other can revive them if they reach them quickly enough. This was particularly helpful when fighting an unforgiving boss that shifted its spider appearance and method of attack frequently.

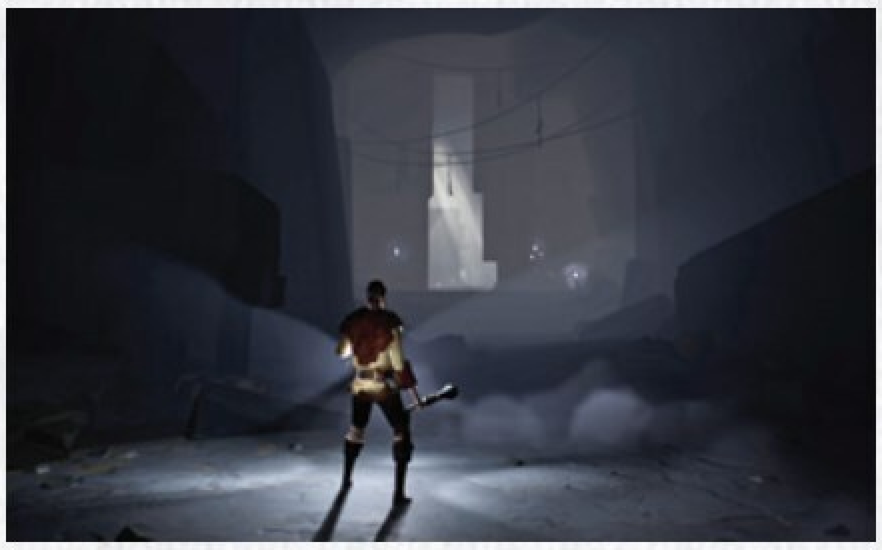
Ashen features Dark Souls-like combat that is difficult but satisfying, where you blend light and heavy attacks, as well as keenly time when to guard. Bashing opponents with your shield knocks them back, giving you an opening to strike. Paying attention to stamina is key, otherwise you may find yourself out of breath briefly. This methodic combat has a fun, rhythmic feel to it.

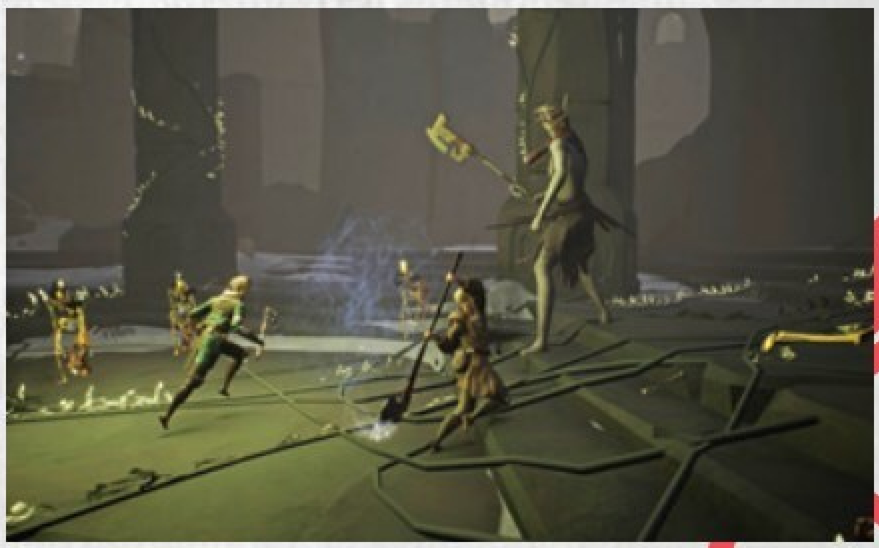
As for weapons, they can be found around the world and upgraded by townsfolk at a price. Because each weapon can be built upon, Bradley says there is no hierarchy between them. They all have the same powerful potential but offer different play styles. These include spears, swords, axes, and more, with some dealing more damage and others allowing you to stun foes.

Relics are additional perks that give you an edge in combat. For example, one relic appears as a bone mask that shields you from damage temporarily.

"There's one [relic] where if you die, and you actually rise out of your own body as this ash creature you get to fight as that for a while," Bradley says. "It's great because it's like a free revival."

Ashen's beauty is both in its mysteries and bleak, low-poly aesthetic. Blades of grass sway in the wind and you, along with other faceless humanoids, look as if you were carefully painted into each scene. Caverns and ancient ruins hold secrets about the origins of this world. In one particularly memorable moment, an immense creature reminiscent of Shadow of the Colossus' colossi floated through the air. This enormous, eel-like being gracefully maneuvered in the sky, as if it were swimming through the clouds. Asking Bradley if we can kill it, he said no – but it can kill us with ease if we're not careful.





Due Process

Platform: *PC at launch; future platforms TBD*
Developer: *Giant Enemy Crab* ***Release:*** *TBD*

When you think of Annapurna, "tactical shooter" may not be the genre that comes to mind, but upcoming title Due Process brings its own twist. Development studio Giant Enemy Crab says that despite the "wonky graphics," Annapurna saw through its superficial elements and understood the team's vision.

Due Process is a 5v5 tactical shooter, where matches are quick and much of your time is put into setting up a plan with teammates. The focus is teamwork, where at the beginning of each level, you draw on a map to cooperatively scribble a strategy that you later execute together. Particularly in the matches I played, it was clear that communication is everything.

"The whole draw of this game is that, while other games are an exercise in playing next to people, here we really want you to play with your team," creative director Alex Baard says.

With an art style reminiscent of the PlayStation 2 era's shooters and semi-blocky aesthetics similar to Time Crisis, Giant Enemy Crab is intentionally steering away from realism so that the team can experiment more creatively.

"With this stylized form we're able to make the game more fun because of it," Baard says. "We're not constrained by realism."

Due Process' maps are a mix of hand-curated and procedurally generated, so that players never know what's coming next. This is a rare quality in a tactical shooter, where often maps are studied meticulously so that players can master them and better understand their environment.

With no A.I. opponents, Baard says it's all about "learning the other team's psychology." You can eventually grasp the opposing team's playstyles and tendencies after several matches with them.

Rather than shipping the game with several multiplayer modes, Giant Enemy Crab wants to keep things simple. The team plans to introduce different objectives and missions, such as hostage situations, but without overcomplicating the game's overall structure.

Wattam

Platform: *PC, Consoles TBD* ***Developer:*** *Funomena* ***Release:*** *2018*

After Sony withdrew as its publisher in 2016, Wattam found new life with Annapurna Interactive a year later. Developed by Funomena and Keita Takahashi, who is best known for Katamari Damacy, Wattam is about friendship, puzzles, and experimentation.

Wattam is both bizarre and whimsical, with gameplay that revolves around interacting with objects that come to life and using their unique skills to progress. It's a difficult game to ascribe a genre to, but that's part of its allure. Its joyful playground is filled with possibility, and you're never quite sure what direction it goes next.

The game begins following a short cutscene about how the world once had everything, but all was lost. All that remains is a lonely mayor: a green cube-sized fellow with a bowler hat.

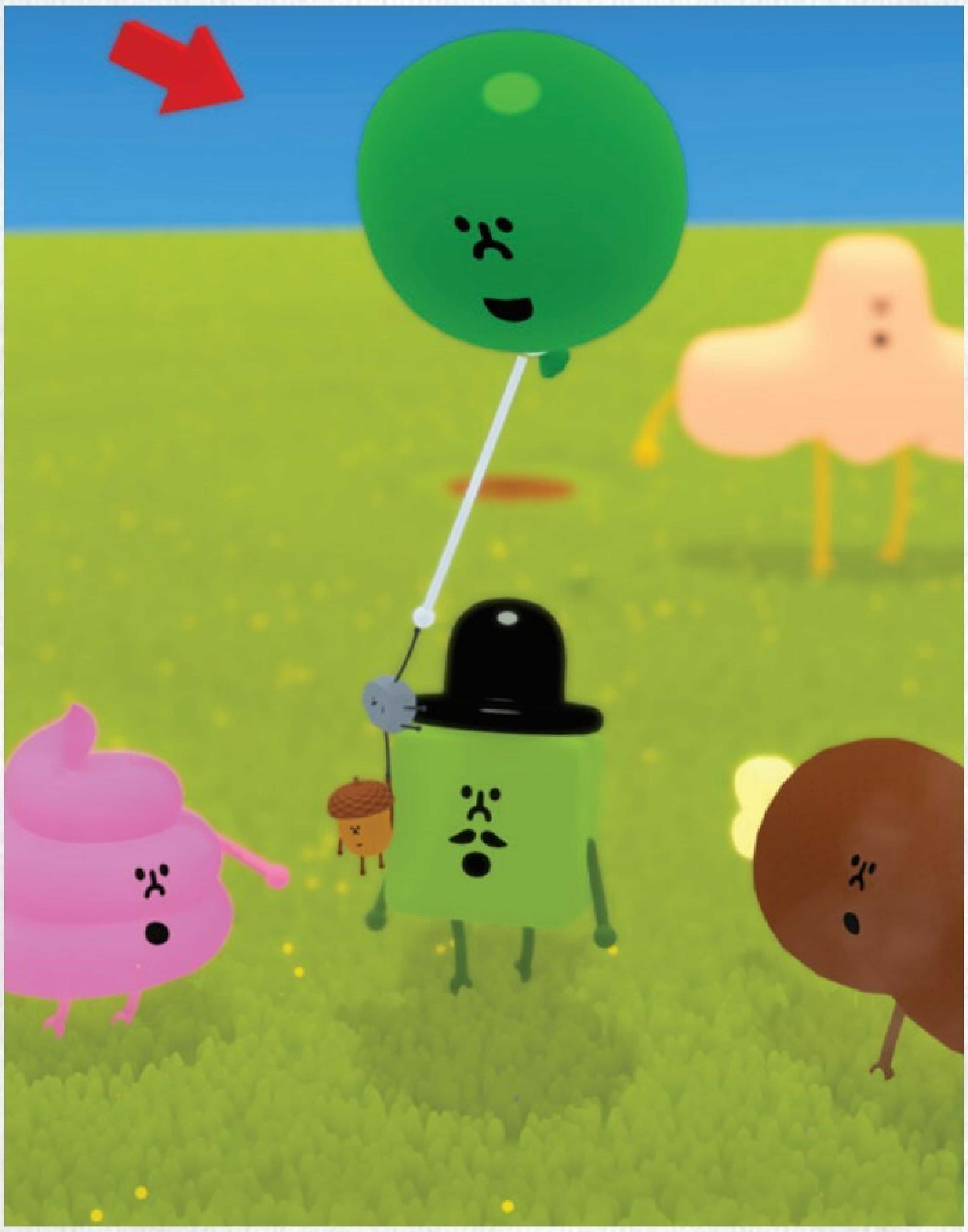
"He's sad because he is alone," Takahashi explains to me during the demo.

However, Mayor isn't alone for long. The rock he's sitting on comes alive and so does a smaller rock. Takahashi makes them all hold hands in a circle, and a magical bomb from under Mayor's hat explodes. Instead of being deadly, the surrounding living objects are thrilled by the sudden confetti and smoke. This explosion makes new object-characters playable.

This is the core of Wattam's gameplay. As you control living objects, you discover that each has a special ability. A toilet can flush, a giant walking nose can smell, and so on. Finding out how to bring new characters into the scene requires some creative thinking. For example, the nose appears when he smells flowers and fruit invites a giant table to join.

Obstacles are frequent, with certain objects needing assistance. For example, an island is sad because he is surrounded by dry land. Using an onion, you can amplify his tears so that an ocean is created.

Each character is comedic, and together they create strange but delightful scenarios. Takahashi describes it as a "linear" game with a beginning and an end, but the discovery and experiments along the way are up to you to find.



Outer Wilds

Platform: *PC, Consoles TBD* ***Developer:*** *Mobius Digital* ***Release:*** *2018*

Outer Wilds, a game that blends banjo-playing, roasting marshmallows, and space exploration, found success even before being picked up by Annapurna. What began as creative director Alex Beachum's master thesis at University of Southern California later amassed a cult following after its alpha build release.

Developed by Mobius Digital, Outer Wilds' unique concept caught Annapurna's eye early on when it was still a modest student project. As of a couple years ago, the two officially began to work together.

"It's been really awesome," creative lead Loan Verneau says. "[Annapurna] really believes in the original vision of the game. Our collaboration with them has really been them helping us reach a much higher level of quality."

Outer Wilds combines the awe-inspiring feeling of space exploration with the tense time constraints of The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask. You play as a blue-skinned, four-eyed alien known as a Hearthian, who finds himself stuck in a time loop.

Your small planet is filled with forestry and has a National Parks' vibe to it, filled with campfires and log cabins. You can explore the planet, talk to your peers, and fiddle with a model rocket ship to practice for the real thing, but the biggest discoveries are in outer space.

After a strange occurrence with an ancient statue portraying the Nomi, an alien race that's long been extinct, you find yourself trapped in a time loop. Every time you die, you restart from your home planet's camping grounds. If you manage to survive, the galaxy's sun goes supernova and forces the restart in 20 minutes. The goal is to get to the bottom of the time loop mystery by making small amounts of progress each time before it resets.

Your makeshift spaceship, which looks like it could have been put together by scraps of metal and duct tape, is your means of travel across the galaxy along with your jetpack. You can seamlessly travel to about five planets along with a couple space stations and moons, without any loading screens. The planets aren't as big as those you'd find in No Man's Sky, but they change over time and are handcrafted instead of procedurally generated.

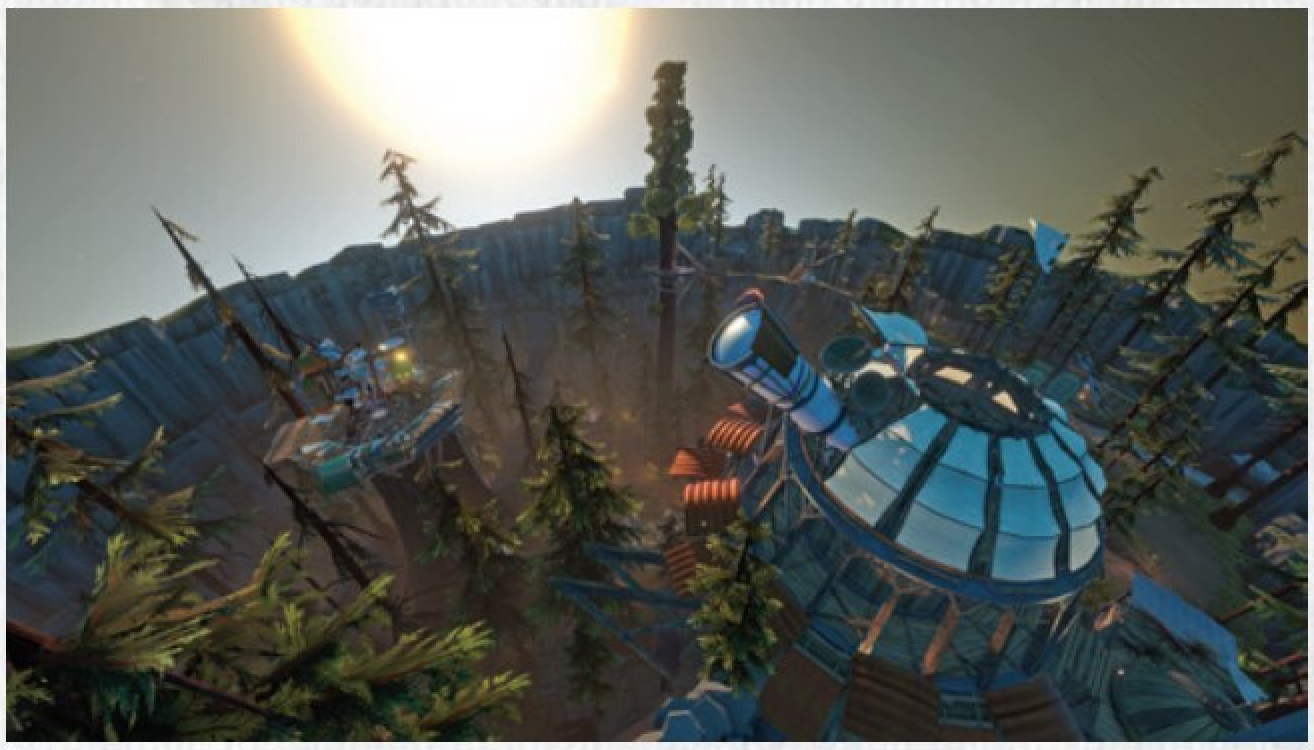
"Each planet has a giant system that changes over time," Verneau says. "You have to learn about these systems and understand how they work to be able to explore the world better."

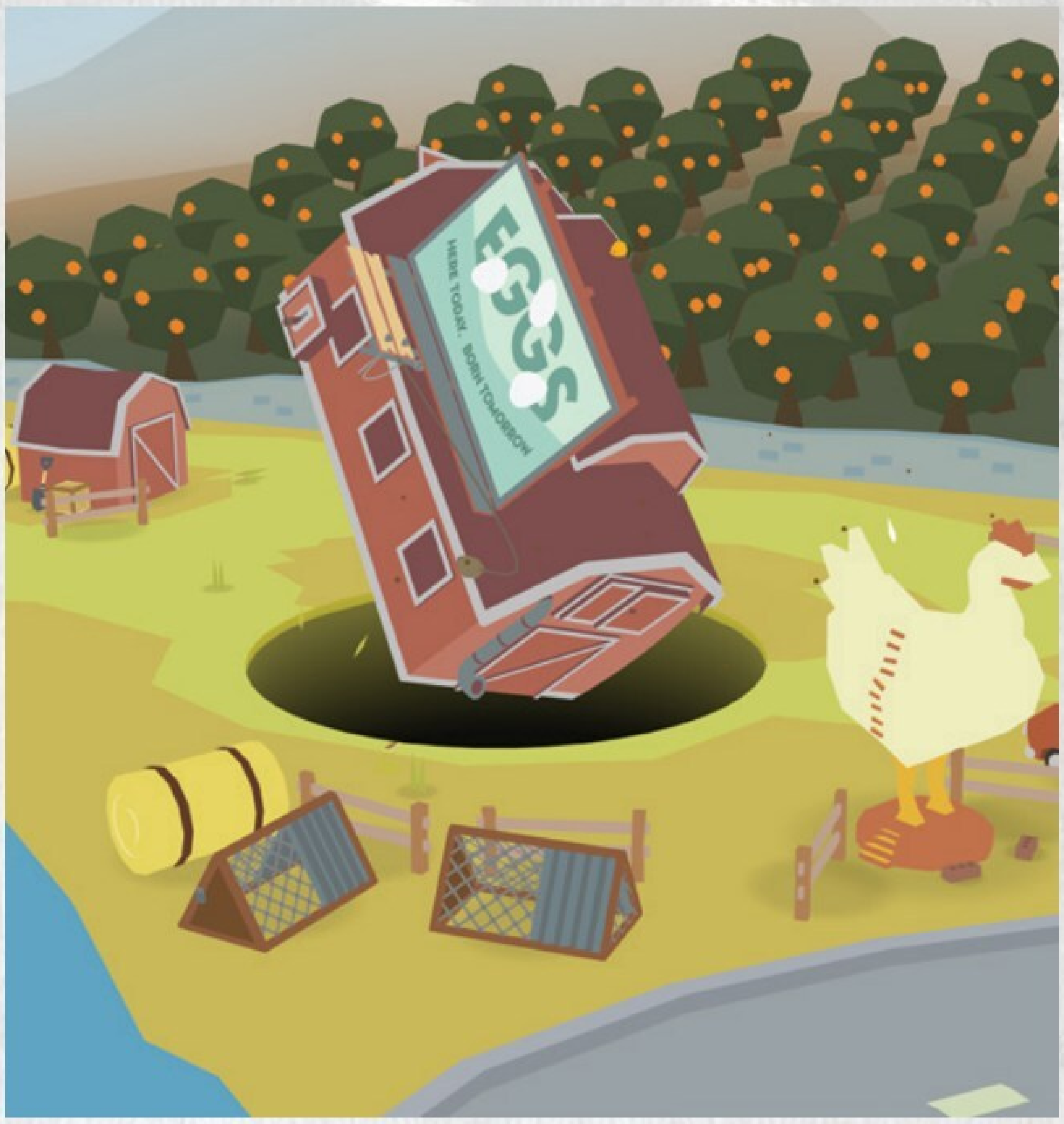
The "systems" that change could be anything from natural disasters to new areas becoming accessible. For example, there are twin planets that orbit one another. At one point, sand will transfer from one planet to the other, making a kind of 'hourglass' effect. This fills caves with sand on one planet, and reveals ruins on the other, which could be key to advancing the story.

You have three tools that help you explore your surroundings: the translator that decodes ancient languages, the Signalscope that picks up frequencies from a distance, and the Little Scout that can be launched into the distance to take photos remotely, detect danger, and illuminate dark spaces.

Outer Wilds is an ambitious title, weaving a fascinating mystery that is uncovered in a non-linear way. At its core, it's a game about exploration and paving your own path.

"Everything you see you can go to, and everything you hear about you can go explore," Verneau says. "It's about rewarding players for their curiosity."





Donut County

Platform: *PS4, PC, iOS* ***Developer:*** *Ben Esposito* ***Release:*** *2018*

Donut County is a whimsical game where you play as a hole. It sounds ridiculous, but the gameplay is surprisingly satisfying and hilarious, to the point where I giggled through the entirety of the demo.

Each time you swallow a new object, the hole gets bigger. Taking place in a town inspired by of Los Angeles, Donut County tells its story through a series of levels where you mess around with physics. You wreak havoc by moving a hole around the area, swallowing everything from trailer homes, buildings, rattle snakes, and more – all to the dismay of the townsfolk.

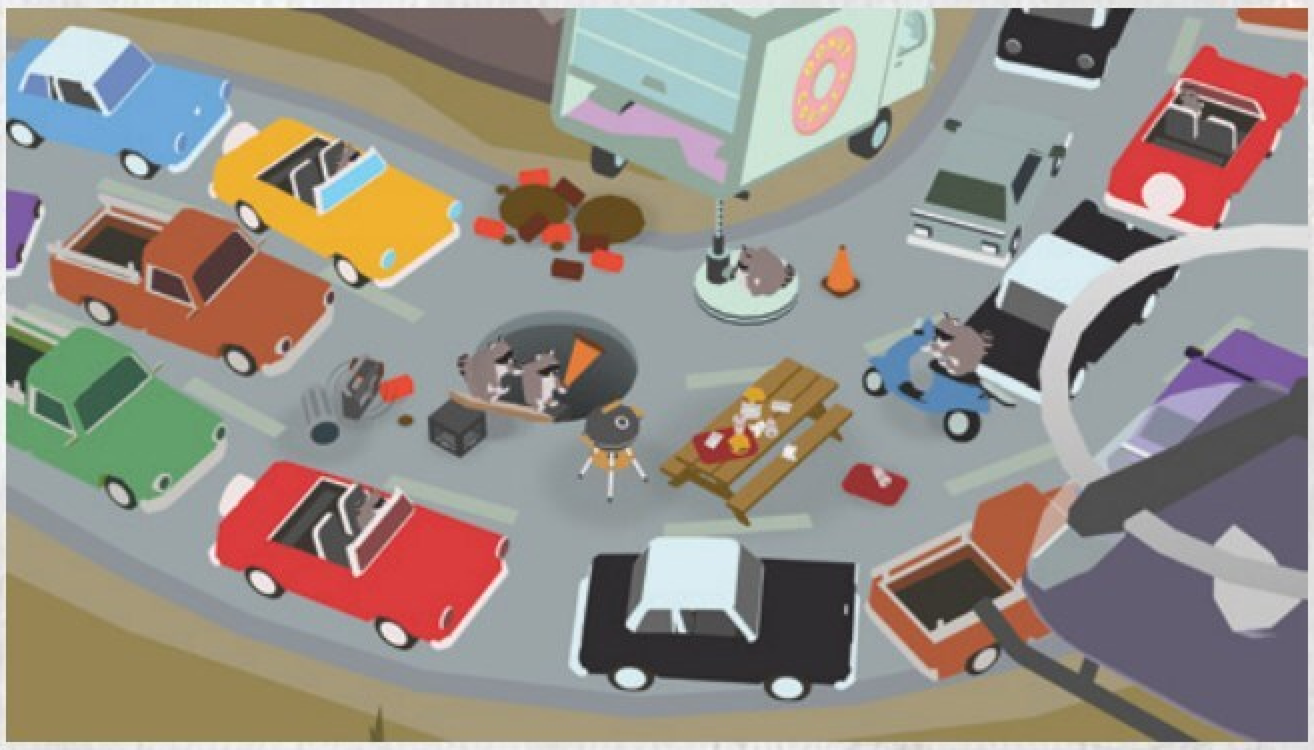
"Originally, the idea of the game was a joke," developer Ben Esposito says. "It was supposed to be a bad idea."

Esposito was inspired by a game jam based on video game pitches from a Peter Molyneux parody Twitter account. What was first just a fun exercise slowly morphed from a side project to full-time venture in the last six years.

Donut County is divided into about 20 levels, where in-between you are treated to segments taking place underground by a campfire. Here, townsfolk (a mix of strange creatures, talking animals, and humans) swallowed by the hole share conspiracy theories about the hole. Unbeknownst to them, the raccoon behind it all sits with them.

The story is told in a non-linear fashion, because Esposito found it more engaging to establish that you are the villain from early on.

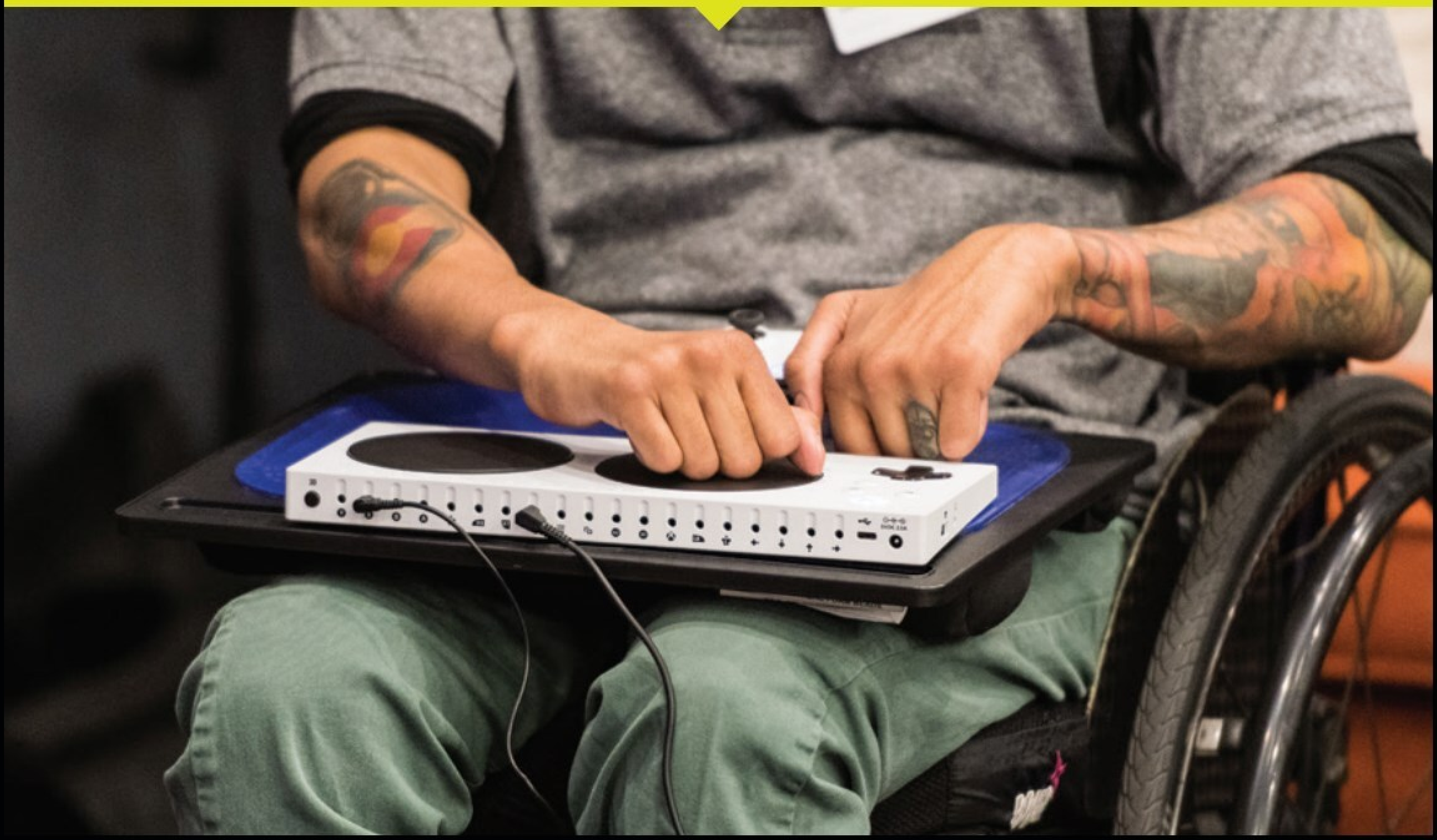
"It's pretty obvious from the beginning that you're just a terrible person," Esposito says. "That's why I wanted to show the consequences first." ◆



g.b.u.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

The Good

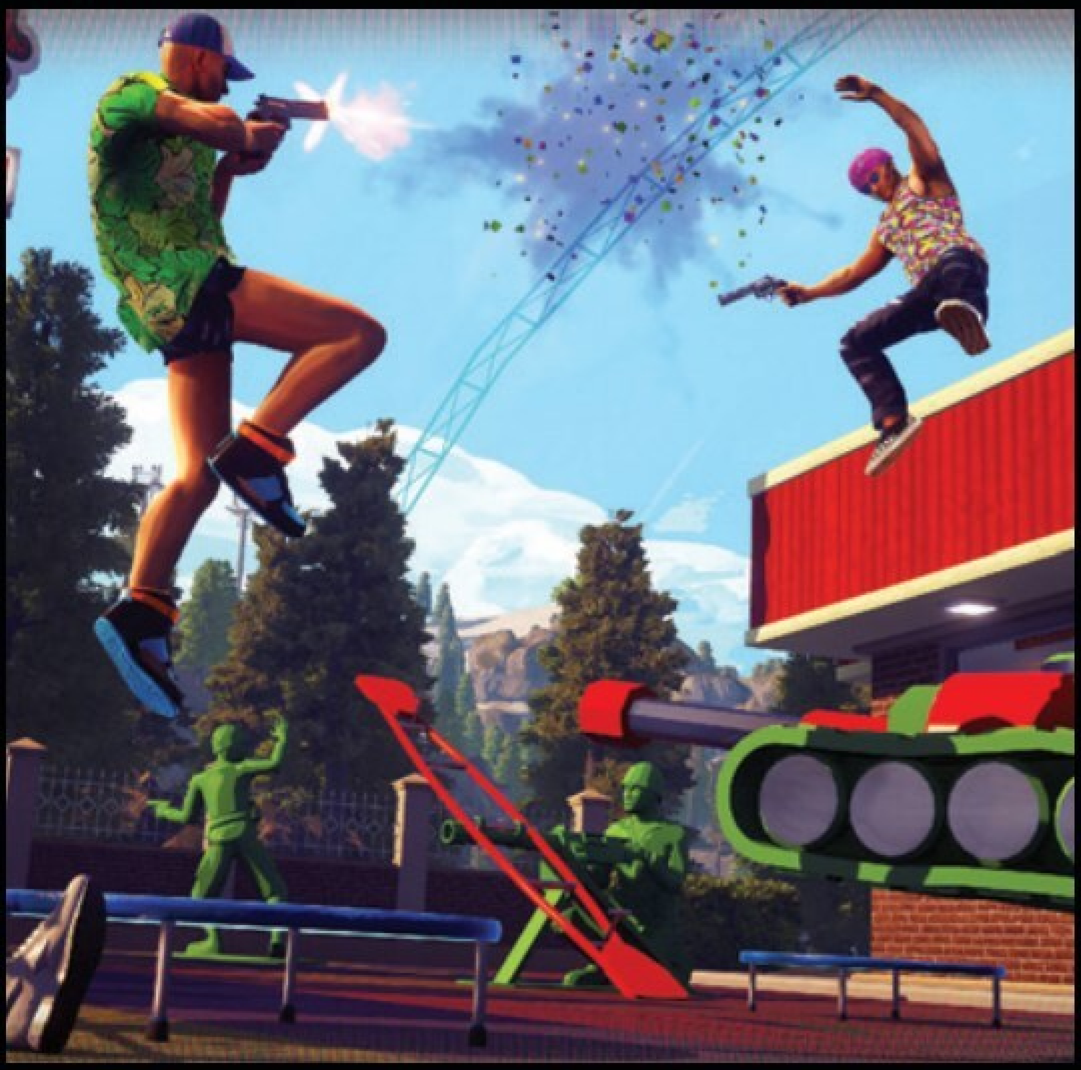


MICROSOFT is releasing the Xbox Adaptive Controller, which is designed with gamers of different physical abilities in mind. The controller has large programmable buttons on its top face and a variety of 3.5mm jacks on its backside for connecting external buttons, switches, joysticks, and other peripherals. This allows for individual customization to accommodate a player's needs. The controller comes out later this year for $99.99.

The Bad

NINTENDO has revealed more details about its online service, which comes out in September. The good news is that the subscription features a relatively inexpensive yearly price tier at $19.99 and access to NES classic titles with new multiplayer features. However, for now the online infrastructure for the Switch still falls short in that it relies on a smartphone app for voice-chat and friend management, and the cloud saves offered by the paid-subscription are still the only way to backup your Switch save data.

NINTENDO SWITCH
NINTENDO SWITCH



Cliff Bleszinski's **BOSS KEY PRODUCTIONS** has closed after the failure of both Radical Heights (shown) and LawBreakers in relatively close succession. Battle royale title Radical Heights was in Early Access for just over a month before Bleszinski made the decision to close shop. In a statement, the veteran creator said, "Videogames will forever be a part of who I am and I hope to make something new again someday…"

The Ugly

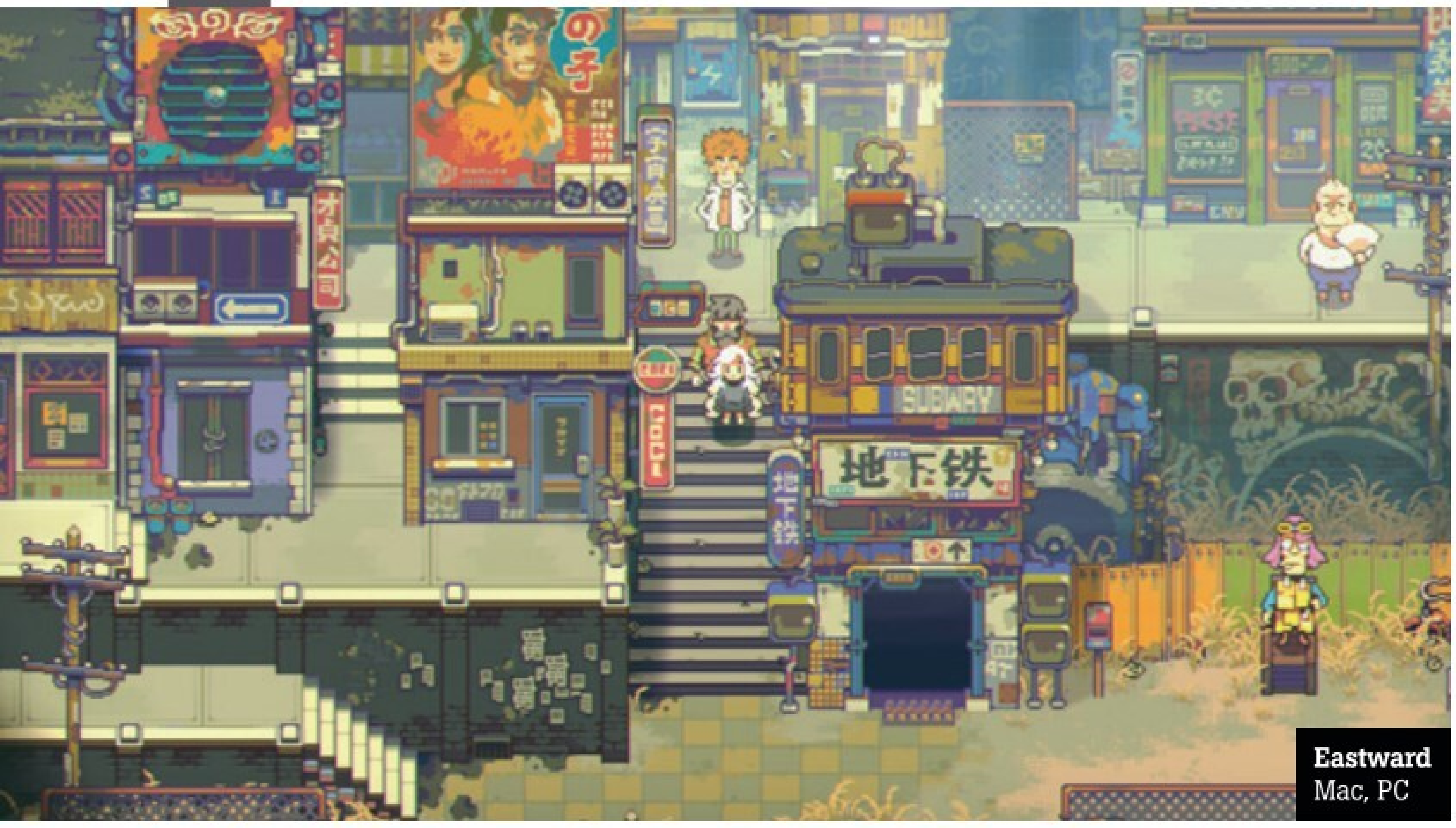
Quotable

"When it will be the time for Deus Ex, it will be the time, and we'll do it correctly."

Eidos Montreal head David Anfossi gives an update on the franchise to VentureBeat

Two Overseas Indies That Aim To Impress

The early indie-games movement experienced a groundswell in North America, but it's been far from contained to one part of the world. Two of the upcoming games I'm most excited about come from developers much further afield. ***by Matt Miller***



Eastward
Mac, PC

Eastward is under contruction at Pixpil, a Shanghai-based studio with big ambitions to rediscover the joy inherent to games like Earthbound, The Legend of Zelda, and the popular Japanese game Boku no Natsuyasumi. Eastward looks to those classic games, as well as a healthy dose of Japanese anime, to inspire its intriguing crossbreed of action, RPG, and adventure elements. My early look was immediately captivating, thanks to both a charming pixel art style and some great nostalgic chiptune-style music from composer Joel Corelitz.

"Gamers will find that the world in Eastward looks familiar to the real world they know, inspired by different regional and cultural elements, but doesn't feel *quite* right," says designer Feng Ye. "In the outside world, the human population has shrunk to an all-time low, and strange creatures are beginning to descend on the cities." Into this post-apocalyptic vision emerge two heroes. John is a hardworking guy hailing from a small underground village, and Sam is the "white, fluffy-haired girl" (as Ye describes her) that John discovers in a secret facility far beneath the Earth.

Like the games that inspired it, Eastward's gameplay focuses on environmental puzzles and action, but Pixpil is being cautious to get the balance right and keep the combat from feeling overwhelming. A big portion of the experience unfolds in dedicated dungeon-delving sections. "The dungeons will form a major part of the story, connecting the narrative, combat and puzzle-solving elements," Ye says. Players control both characters to complete cooperative actions as they explore these locales. Along the way, Eastward eschews any complicated leveling features, with improvements mostly garnered from items. "Our characters will pick up different weapons or items as the game progresses, each of them helpful during dungeon gameplay in their own way," Ye says. "Even a frying pan might turn out to be useful!"

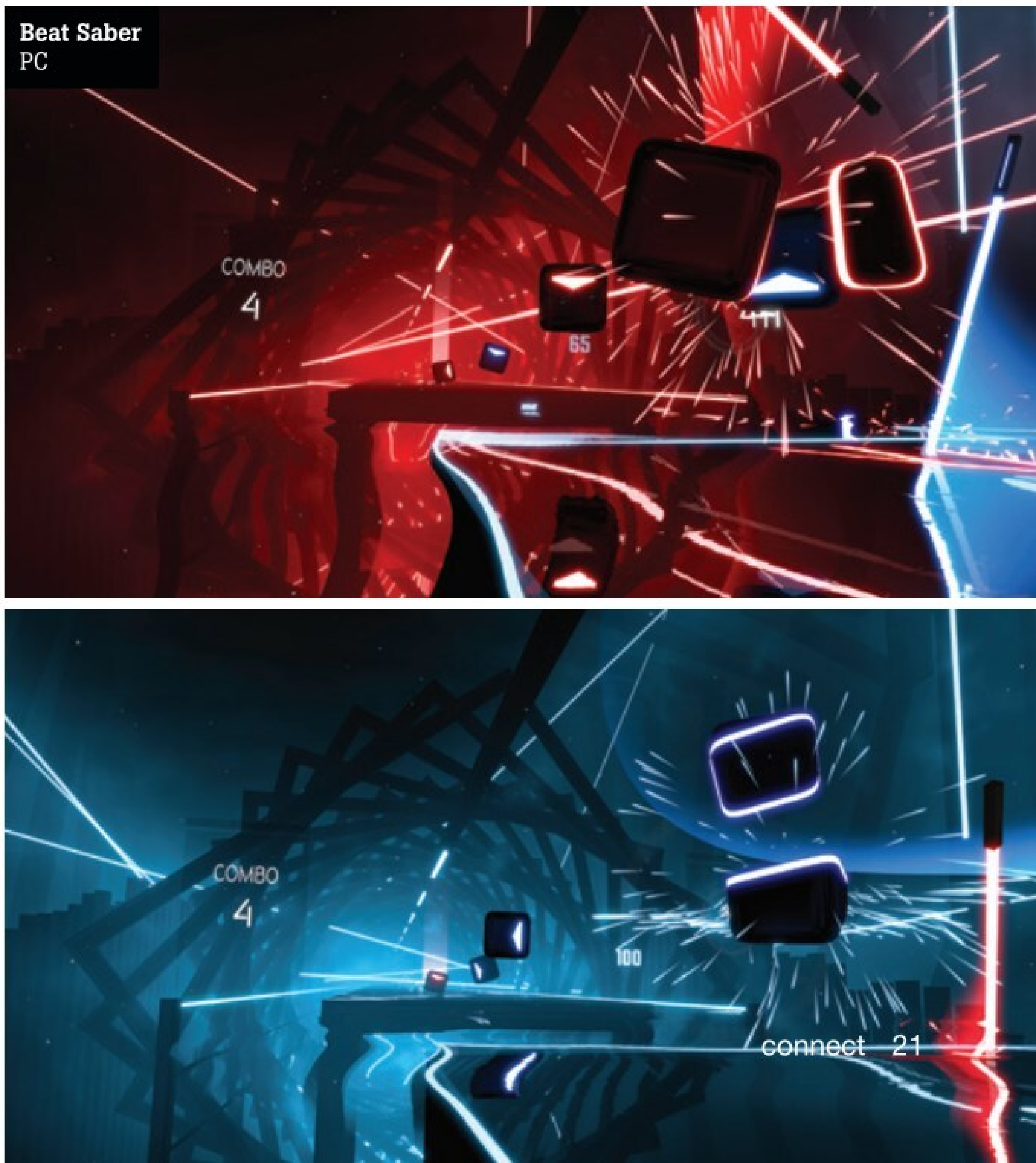
Eastward is targeting release on PC and Mac, but Ye hopes the game might eventually head to consoles and other platforms. Pixpil isn't yet ready to discuss potential release dates.

Across the world, the team at Hyperbolic Magnetism in the Czech Republic has crafted one of the most talked about VR games of recent months. Currently available on Vive and Rift in early access, **Beat Saber** is a rollicking music game that is hard not to love. This VR-exclusive sees you jacking in to a neon-washed playscape. Look down at your hands to see two glowing swords, suspiciously similar to red and blue lightsabers from *Star Wars*. From here, blocks begin to flow down the screen toward you, each with directional arrows to indicate required slashing direction. Beat-heavy electronic music thumps in your headphones, and it's time to swing, stab, dodge, and groove along as your saber smashes through one block to the next.

Beat Saber may evoke *Star Wars*, but playing it feels most like being a drummer. As the blocks come flying your way, especially on harder difficulties, you find your two hands reaching out to keep different beat patterns in distinct locations, almost like you're moving around a massive drum kit. Like earlier music games such as Guitar Hero and Rock Band, gameplay is focused on streak maintenance and high-score chasing, but the aerobic feel of sword-swinging adds a physical component that is hard to beat.

As the game exists right now in early access, there are fewer songs than I want – but only because I was having such a blast with what was already there. Multiple difficulty settings, options for one or two sabers at once, and even options to turn off the arrows so you just have to hit the blocks in any direction are all indications that the game is being built with multiple tiers of player skill in mind. It's some of the most fun I've had with a VR game, music-themed or otherwise. If you've been looking for something to justify that recent VR-unit purchase, I'd encourage a look.

Beat Saber
PC



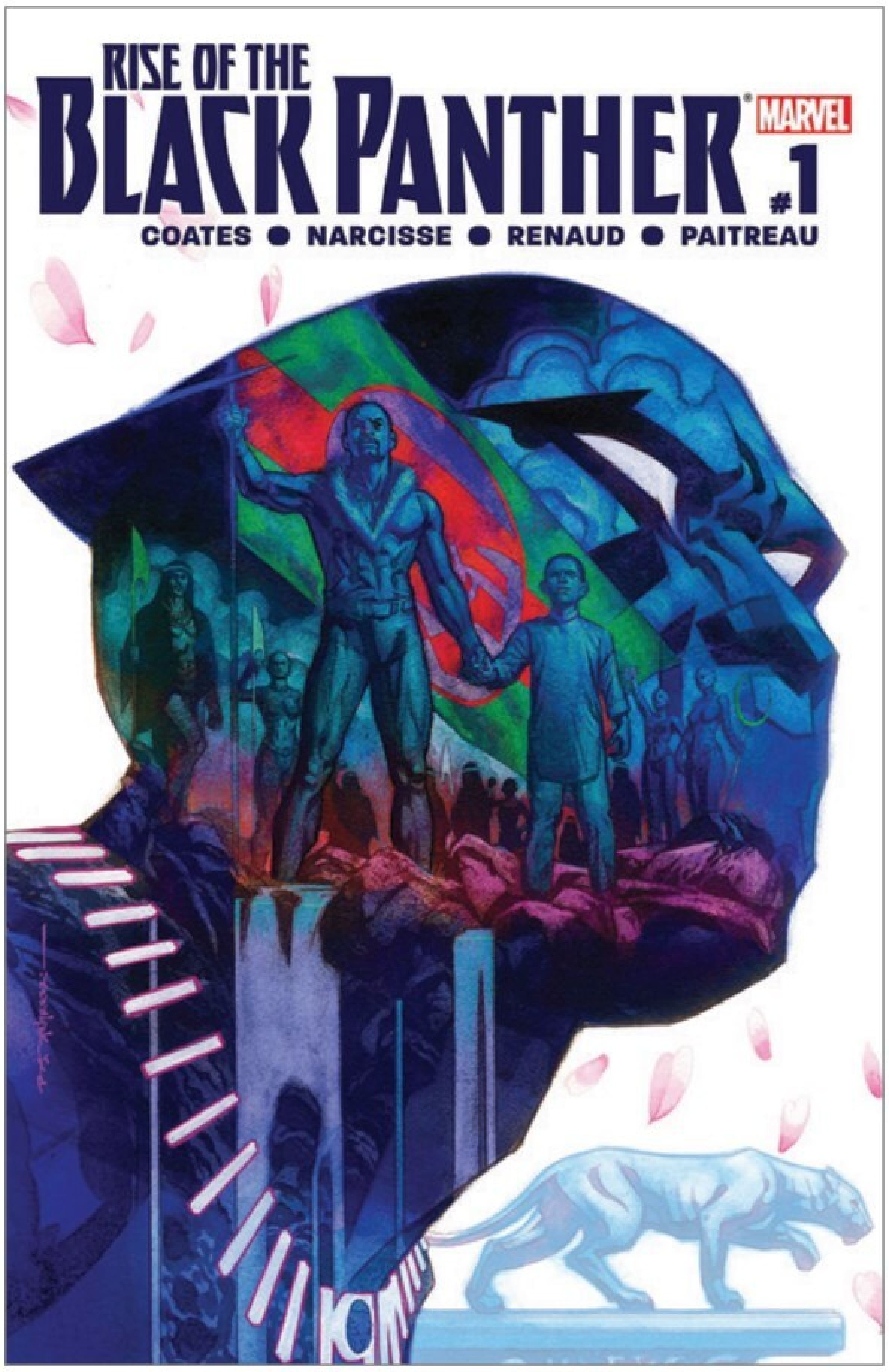
by Andrew Reiner

Wakanda Forever!

Why we need a Black Panther video game

No superhero film has grossed more than Marvel Studios' *Black Panther*. With an impressive $696 million earned in the U.S. box office, *Black Panther* ranks as the third-highest grossing film of all time, trailing only *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* ($936 million), and *Avatar* ($760 million). If *Avengers: Infinity War* continues to perform at a record-setting pace, it will surpass *Black Panther*'s haul, but no dollar amount will diminish theatergoers' fascination with the kingdom of Wakanda.

The immense success of this film took everyone by surprise. Disney's CEO Bog Iger tweeted that "the world has embraced *Black Panther*, which has obliterated expectations, broken records, and shattered myths. Powerful storytelling that touches hearts, bridges cultures, and opens minds." More people went to see it than any Batman, Iron Man, or Spider-Man film. Let that sink in for a second.



Black Panther's stratospheric rise in popularity should lead to a video game. The fact that we don't have one yet is absurd. When I sat in the theater watching the film, I continually found myself saying this hero, world, and story are perfect for video games. He has the superhuman strength and speed of Wolverine and Spider-Man, and he's decked out in armor that rivals Iron Man's. Who wouldn't want to take control of that kind of might?

Black Panther, and the man behind the mask, T'Challa, have fascinated comic-book readers since first debuting in *Fantastic Four* issue 52, which released in July 1966. Not only is T'Challa one of the first heroes of African origin in American comic books, he broke the mold for masked characters. He doesn't need to conceal his identity – he is king to his people, and the costume he wears is a symbol of the position he holds. He's more concerned about hiding his kingdom of Wakanda, its culture, and its people. Wakanda is far more advanced than any other nation on the planet, and its advancements need to be kept secret, as they could unleash untold destruction if they fell into the wrong hands.

Marvel has provided decades worth of great Black Panther stories, ranging from Ta-Nehisi Coates' *A Nation Under Our Feet* to Christopher Priest's lengthy run on the core series. While Black Panther's stories are sometimes isolated in Wakanda, he frequently moonlights as an Avenger, and is often integrated into the lore of other characters. He's one of Marvel's beloved characters, yet he hasn't had much of a pulse in video games.

Black Panther's video game debut shows just how little game developers either respected or understood who he was. He first appeared as an unlockable character in Raven Software's Marvel Ultimate Alliance for PlayStation 2. Wakanda is a featured location in Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2, yet its protector wasn't included in the core game, and had to be purchased separately by fans. In recent years, he has been included in roster-heavy games like Disney Infinity, Lego Marvel Super Heroes, and Marvel vs. Capcom: Infinite.

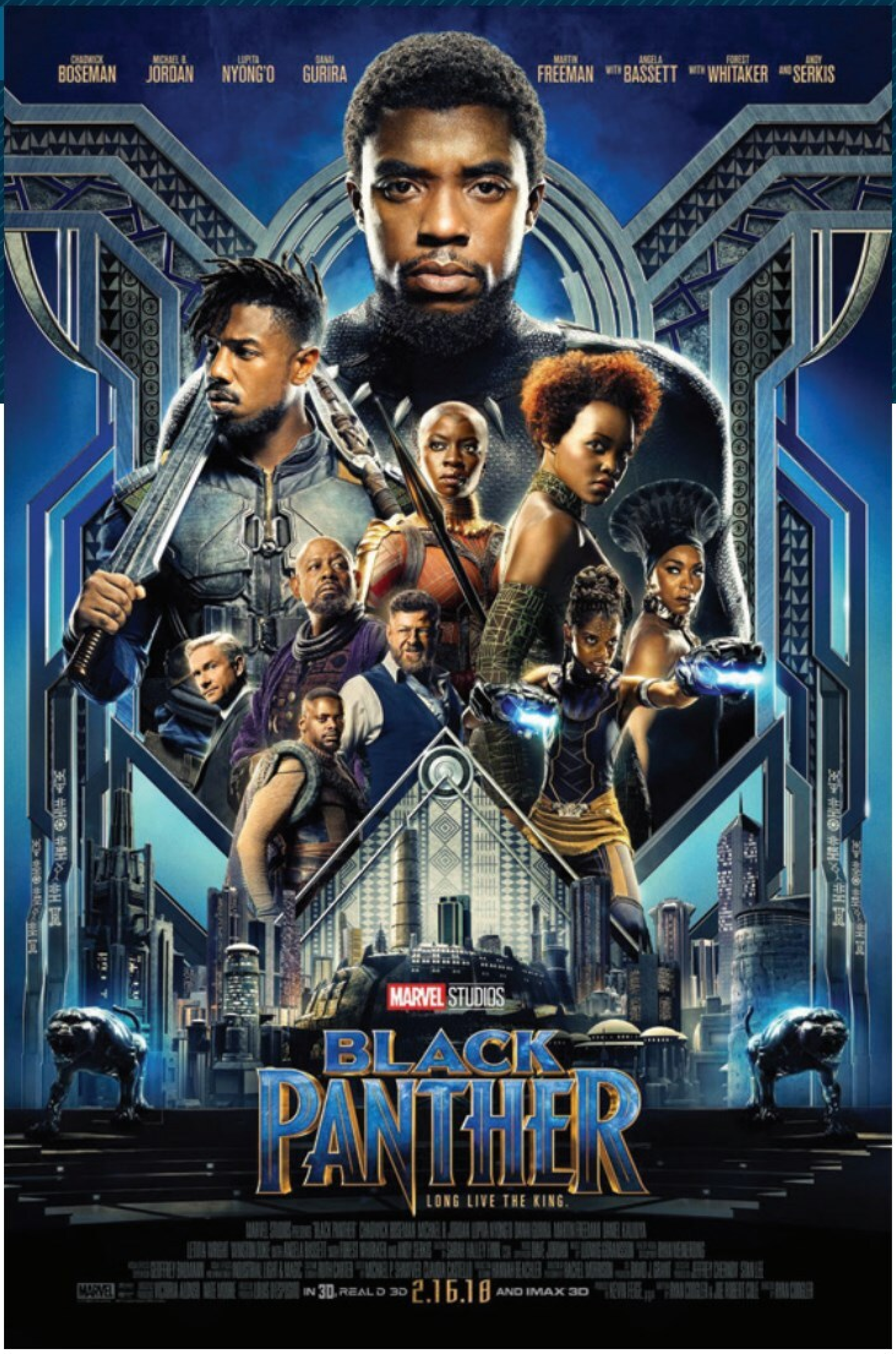
Now that the movie has propelled his stardom to the heights of the Spider-Mans of the world, it's time for him to headline a video game. Thor has done it. Iron Man has two games under his belt, and even the Guardians of the Galaxy have their own Telltale series. Marvel appears to be opening the doors to more developers to work on their properties, and I'm hoping Black Panther is next in line after Insomniac Games' Spider-Man and Crystal Dynamics' Avengers Project.

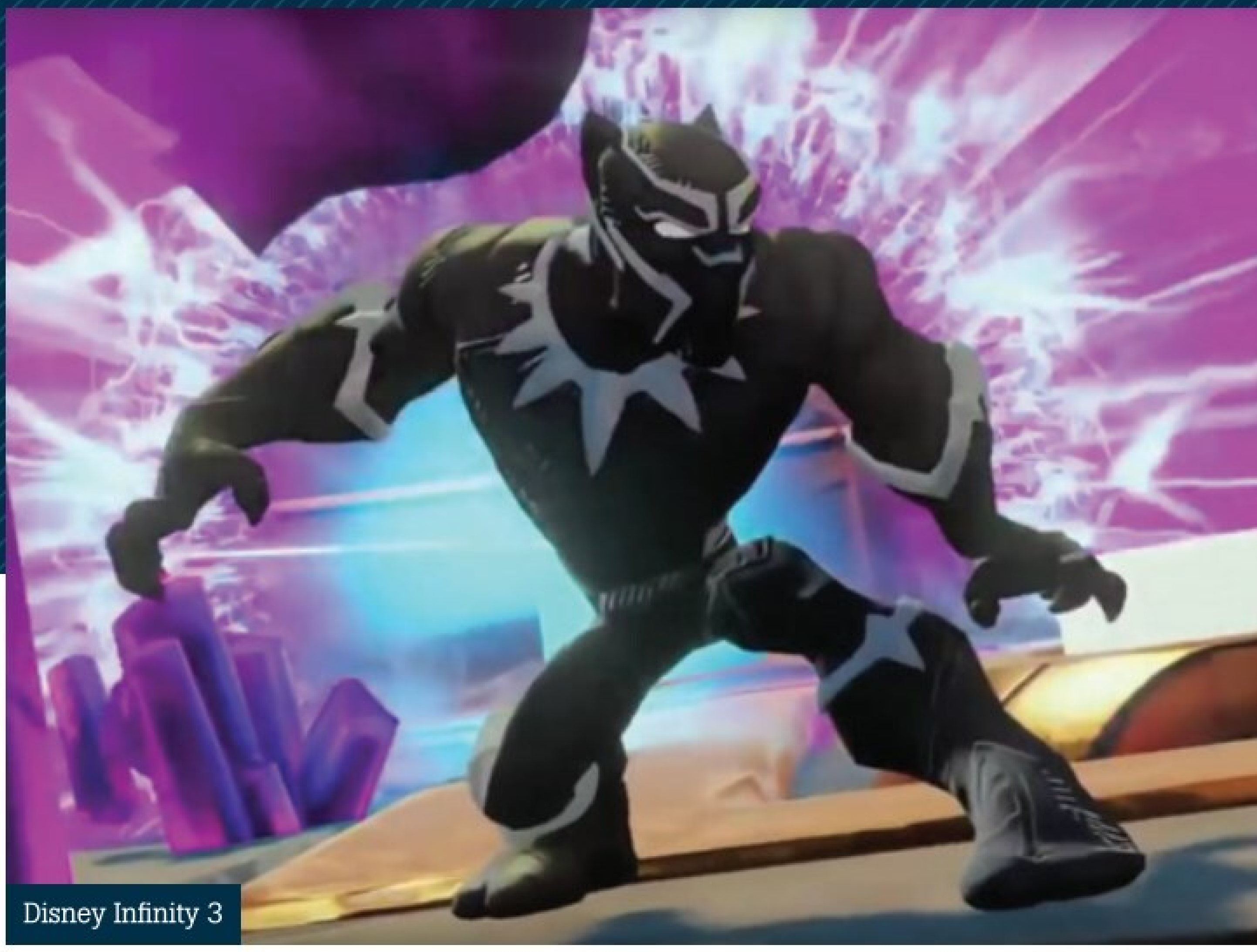
Writer Evan Narcisse, who recently penned Marvel's excellent *Rise of the Black Panther* comic book series (and just happens to be a game journalist) is baffled by the fact that we haven't seen a triple-A Black Panther video game yet.

"There are two characters who seem to be screaming for video games. T'Challa is one of them, and Wonder Woman is the other," he says. "Both of their worlds are set up so well for big, wide-ranging open-world games. For Wonder Woman, you would be running around fighting giant mythical monsters. For T'Challa, you have the makings of a great action/RPG built into the character – from the technology for a tech tree and gadgets, to his history, which could start centuries ago. You don't have to tether it to the modern era."

The sophisticated technology hidden away in Wakanda is just one way the Black Panther stories explore afrofuturism, a movement that sews together black history and culture with science-fiction themes. Something people don't realize: Black Panther is science fiction at heart, often going far beyond Tony Stark's crazy inventions.

Few games have explored afrofuturism, but one of the most-played multiplayer experiences out there right provides an excellent (albeit brief) look at a futuristic African society.




Disney Infinity 3

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2

Overwatch's Numbani map shows us how technology has advanced in the African savanna, turning this region into a thriving utopia known as the "City of Harmony." Other video game examples include League of Legends' champion, Ekko, who wields wild time-bending sci-fi tech of his design, and Halo's New Mombasa port city, located in south Kenya. The Dreamfall series explores cyberpunk themes in Africa, which has transformed into an economic superpower.

While there are some examples of games featuring African characters, we rarely see games set in Africa that focus on its culture and people. Even though it's heavily sci-fi, a Black Panther game would be a great vehicle for exploring these largely untapped themes. Many people who walked out of the movie theater wanted to immediately return to Wakanda, as writers Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole did a fantastic job of teasing just how big a secret world it was. "It reminded me of *Star Wars: A New Hope*," Narcisse says. "Wow. I just got a glimpse into this other world that seems like it's been existing all this time and I didn't even know about it. *Black Panther* felt the same. It's amazing how they constructed the world."

Creating a game based on the movie world may not be the right call, however. For one, movie-based games carry the stigma of being disasters. We have an entire graveyard full of heroes that failed out in this way. The better avenue would be taking a page from Rocksteady's work on the Batman: Arkham series and creating a standalone story that pulls heavily from all of the great Black Panther works.

"Things that are divergent like that have been great," Narcisse adds. "I've been playing Telltale's Batman games for two seasons, and I love how unexpected it's been. They've established this lore that they can completely upend. This could work for T'Challa. You don't have to be beholden to one vision of him."

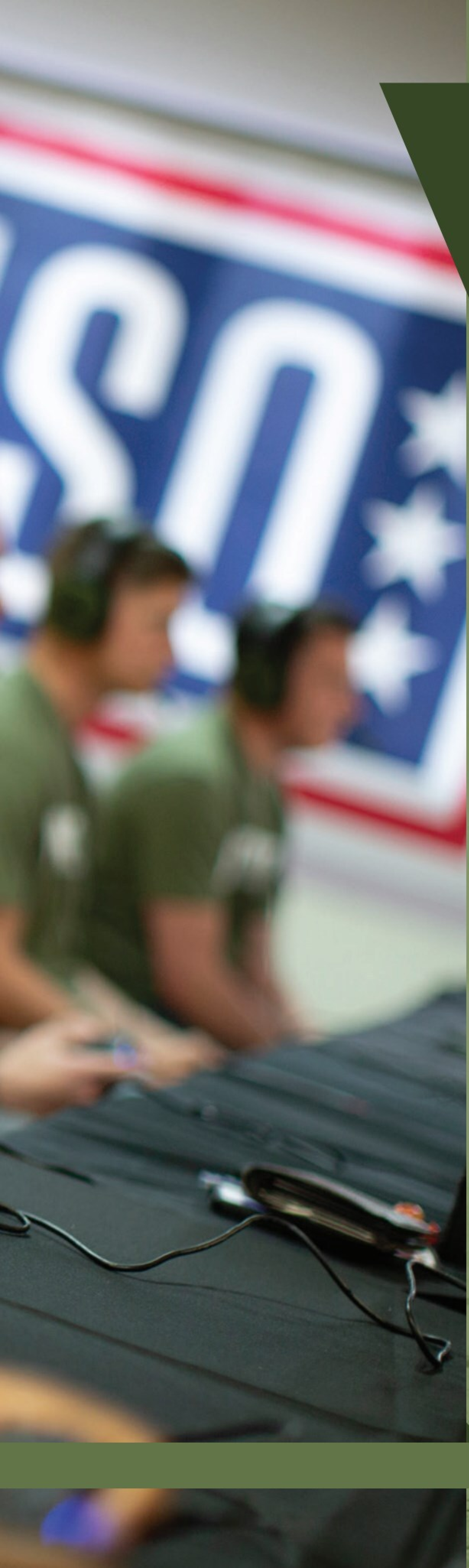
Beyond Black Panther, Wakanda offers a robust lineup of characters that could either be used in a secondary role or to take over the spotlight at times. Okaye and her Dora Milaje would be great additions to a game, as would T'Challa's tech-smart sister, Shuri, who could provide new gadgets and upgrades or lend a hand in combat should you need assistance. Villains could range from series staples like Klaw and Man-Ape to universe-wide threats like Doctor Doom and Baron Zemo.

We'll have to wait to see what the future holds for Black Panther in the video game space, but I wouldn't be surprised if Marvel Games is having serious discussions with numerous developers and publishers that have interest in this property. He's as big as Spider-Man and Batman right now, and the universe he inhabits is perfect for games. I also wouldn't be surprised if Crystal Dynamics' take on the Avengers has T'Challa on the roster, and perhaps even playable. He's king of Wakanda and king of the superhero box office. He deserves a shot, and there's no doubt people will line up to play it. If a project comes to fruition, I just hope Marvel finds the right studio and creators capable of doing the license justice.

COPING WITH WAR

Where video games and the lives of soldiers intersect

by Javy Gwaltney



You probably have your own idea of who "the troops" are. Maybe that idea was molded by repeated showings of *M.A.S.H,* the works of Tom Clancy, or films like *The Hurt Locker*. But just who are America's soldiers, individually? What do they do when they're not patrolling bases, running drills, or fighting on the battlefield?

We got the chance to find out.

Activision and The United Service Organizations (the USO) recently put on a joint tour, traveling to military installations across the world to show off new Call of Duty: WWII DLC and host tournaments for the soldiers at each stop. I hitched a ride and spoke to countless soldiers and veterans about everything from tactics for dealing with the ever-present boredom of base life to coping with injuries and whether or not they prefer Fortnite or PUBG.

Here's the truth straight from the mouths of many men and women in the armed service about how video games have become an inescapable part of their lives.

AMERICALAND

Ramstein fulfills several duties, including training and maintaining multiple squads of soldiers. The American-run installation was founded by a number of European nations in 1952 as a display of the strength of international relations in the aftermath of World War II. Ramstein fulfills several duties, including training and maintaining multiple squads of bomb-disposal experts and K-9 units. The base also provides a setting that tries to capture a piece of the world back home for the people who serve here.

Communities within Ramstein are composed of rows of canary-yellow apartment complexes. The recreation center even serves up surprisingly authentic tasting barbeque and thin-crust pizza. If you walked into Ramstein without realizing you were already in Germany, there would be almost no giveaways except for the occasional German sign or national resident who dips into their native language when they can't find the right English word.

Built into the base hotel is a mall (the KMCC) that has a massive department store and a food court containing a Taco Bell, Starbucks, and Johnny Rockets. Minor breaches, such as the movie-theater showtimes being in military time, as well as the bier halle next to the Dunkin' Donuts poke holes in this strange American theme park, but it does its job well enough, especially if you're a soldier who's been away from home for months.

However, sometimes you need more than shops to feel at home again, and that's why the troops at Ramstein are getting excited. Whenever we see one of the soldiers as our tour group passes, there's usually a grin on their face.

It's not hard to guess why: Call of Duty has come to town.

BRING THE RUCKUS

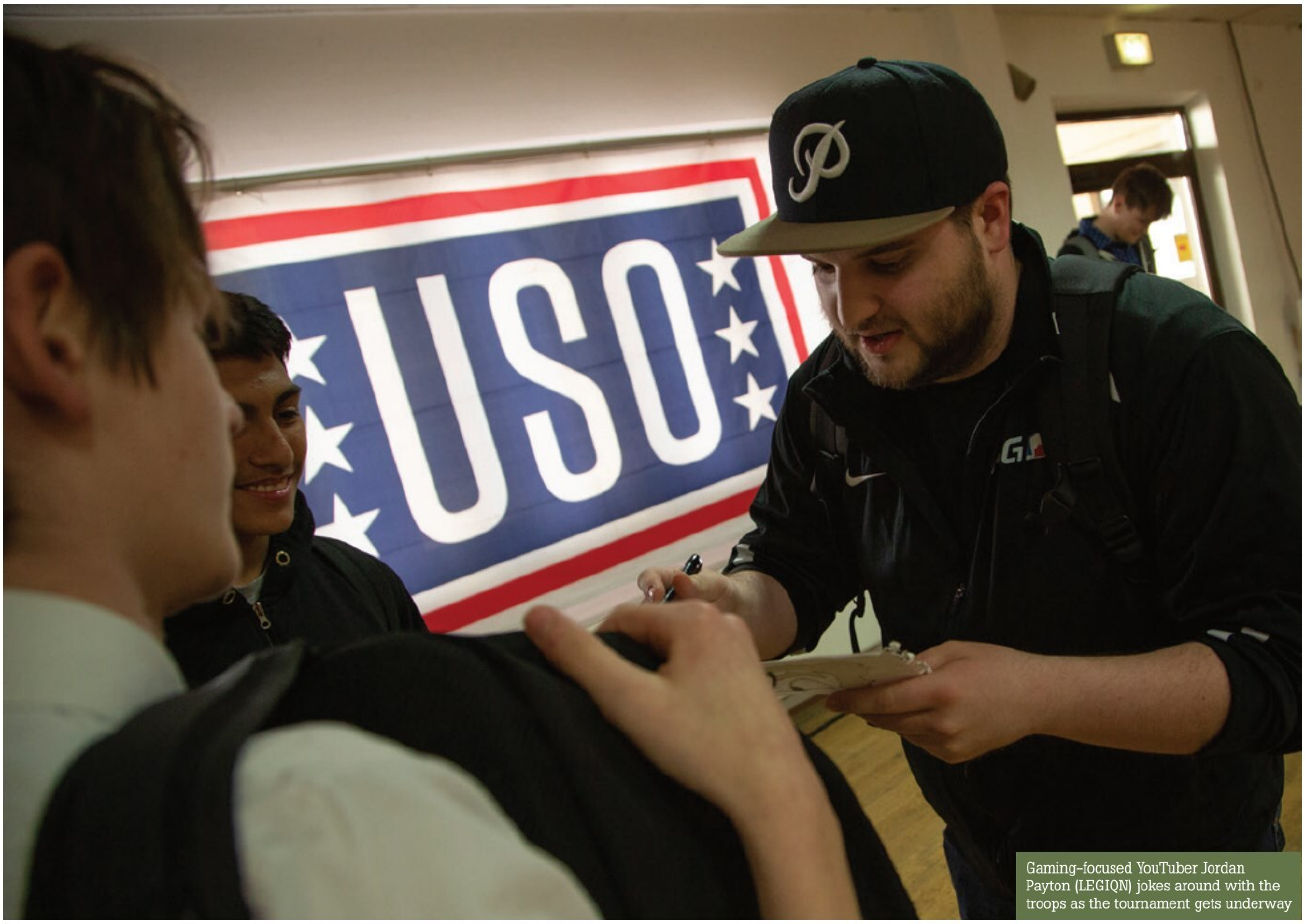
Three Activision production team members work quickly to set up the 24 PlayStation 4s for a no-stakes, friendly tournament in the community center's main hall. It's a quaint but charming place, the kind of joint where you'd stage a homecoming dance. There's barely enough room to hold all the soldiers' let alone the family members who have come to watch and participate. Before the tournament is even under way, several of the soldiers are crowding around the developers, asking them about what it was like to develop the game and for details on the upcoming Black Ops 4. Sledgehammer's team is good-natured about it, not dropping any hints, but they thank the troops for their enthusiasm and crack jokes with them. As the tournament begins, it becomes immediately clear just how much Call of Duty means to the crowd. These aren't just bored men and women looking for some kicks to pass the time. For a lot of them, video games are a way of life.

"All service members are gamers in their own right. Lot of nerds in the military," bomb-disposal expert Jeffery Hegel tells me, chuckling. According to Hegel, the disposal team often plays Super Smash Bros. Melee tournaments when they're off duty as a way to relax. Liam Fink, a senior officer with electrical engineering, sees the game as a social activity. "It's a good way to build camaraderie between friends," he tells me, saying it's also one of the ways he stays in contact with other former members from other deployments. Gaming is a family activity on the base as well, according to Master Sgt. Michael Becker., who plays through all the Call of Duty campaigns with his son, Owen. "Playing is something interesting for us to do as a family," he says. "It's stuff we do together. It's a lot of fun."

As the tournament goes on, soldiers talk trash but never curse, and they cheer whenever they win a round. The center transforms into a loud, exciting arena, with the teams that make it to the final rounds screaming map positions in their headphones and sticking together in groups in-game. Other soldiers stand behind those playing, encouraging them on or poking fun at their fellow service members for playing badly. When the final match ends, the room rumbles and roars, with the victors standing up to fist pump and shout like they're on live television.

Tomorrow these soldiers will go back to their posts and resume their duties, but for now, in this moment, they're living like champions.

As far as the tour is concerned? We've got a flight to catch.



Gaming-focused YouTuber Jordan Payton (LEGIQN) jokes around with the troops as the tournament gets underway

A TALE OF TWO BASES

We find no malls at either of the military installations we visit in Kuwait's desert, but the console wars are alive and well at Camp Arifjan and Camp Buehring. Both bases are support outposts in the Middle East that accommodate all branches of the armed service, and are a far cry from the populated pseudo-suburbia we saw in Germany. Some shops are sprinkled throughout each base (including the inescapable Starbucks), as well as surprisingly clean porta potties, but mostly there's sand. And a seemingly endless supply of soldiers doing everything in their power to stave off boredom.

That's where the USO comes in. "Our job is to keep service members connected to family, home, and country," says Chris Stagner, the organization's PR manager and a veteran. "We look to provide them with what they need to serve the country with USO centers that let them come blow off steam by watching TV, playing games, or reading books in the reading room." For many soldiers serving in the Middle East, these USO centers are their bastion of entertainment in a place that has precious little excitement.

Both centers contain libraries, one for adults, filled with literary paperbacks as well as cooking guides and page turners. However, there's also a library filled with children's books that soldiers can check out to read to their kids over video chat. A nearby theater showcases movies stowed away on a server. And, of course, there's an entire section of the center dedicated to gaming stations. A check-in desk at the front of the center reveals a host of PS4 games to check out that includes everything from Bloodborne to Grand Theft Auto V and Madden. Activision also donated more than $100,000 worth of Call of Duty titles to USO centers around the world during the tour. Out of all the departments in the USO center, the gaming section is the most popular. For many soldiers looking to escape piping-hot temperatures and a profound feeling of isolation and homesickness, gaming is the optimal way to accomplish that feat. It's not hard to understand why: Many of this generation's soldiers grew up with games.

"I've been playing video games since I was four," sergeant Jesus Martinez Jr. tells me excitedly. He radiates with fervent enthusiasm when talking about his passion for The Legend of Zelda and how he plays Monster Hunter World with his wife and seven-year-old daughter. But it's also an activity he enjoys by himself as well, a fundamental part of his life. "Gaming is escaping reality. Like here, it's every day work routine but playing games, it feels like a whole new world, new character, new life."

Martinez is not alone in his love of digital escapism. During our time in Kuwait, gaming was everywhere. One soldier proudly told me about how he managed to save $1,000 on his Alienware laptop before his deployment. Troops arguing about whether PlayStation was better than Xbox was an inescapable conversation at both camps. Countless soldiers told me gaming had been a part of their lives for as long as they could remember and explained how games were essential in coping with stress and loneliness.

Melissa Renee Williams, a mechanic, has played games since the original PlayStation and finds interactive experiences to be "a really

VICTORY THROUGH ENDURANCE
WELCOME TO Fabulous LAS VEGAS NEVADA
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HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS

In both Camp Arifjan and Camp Buehring, soldiers leave their mark on concrete blockades before exiting deployment

USO
Camp Arifjan

Both camps have entertainment centers funded by the USO filled with a massive library of games for soldiers to check out

Games are an essential part of helping soldiers escape the dullness of on-base life

CALL OF DUTY
WWII
BAKER 2

cool way to relax." She spends her free hours roaming the historical playgrounds of Assassin's Creed when she's not squaring off against other service members in Call of Duty's multiplayer. Some soldiers even investigate building an audience as a streamer, like Warren J. Wiggins of the Engineer Battalion, who streams shooters like Ghost Recon: Wildlands on Twitch. "I like the support part of streaming … with people wanting to watch you and interact with you. I think gaming is therapeutic. It helps me escape reality. When I get into a game like Ghost Recon or Call of Duty, I'm in that character, I don't think about anything other than the game."

Our time on all three bases evinced that the formerly ostracized hobbies of geekdom are now the mainstream. Not only was gaming a huge part of base life on every installation we visited, but also cultural adjacent subjects, too. During one of the tournaments, one soldier roamed the USO center shouting "Wakanda forever!" In another, I watched a group of soldiers on the periphery of the action shoot side-eyed glances toward the tournament's ruckus as they prepped to play a fantasy tabletop game. Camp Buehring's USO center even hosts a monthly anime night. But more than being part of the current zeitgeist, gaming and geek culture serves as a refuge and boon for soldiers who have fulfilled their service.

WHAT COMES AFTER

Once the tour was done and I was back in America, I talked to several veterans who served in various wars and operations about what it means to come home and how games can help. Transitioning is a notoriously difficult process, especially for soldiers who join the military right out of high school and have never had any other professional experience. The armed service is a meticulously structured operation that builds an atmosphere of comradery. Confronting the chaos and freedom of the unstructured civilian world can be traumatic for those leaving the military.

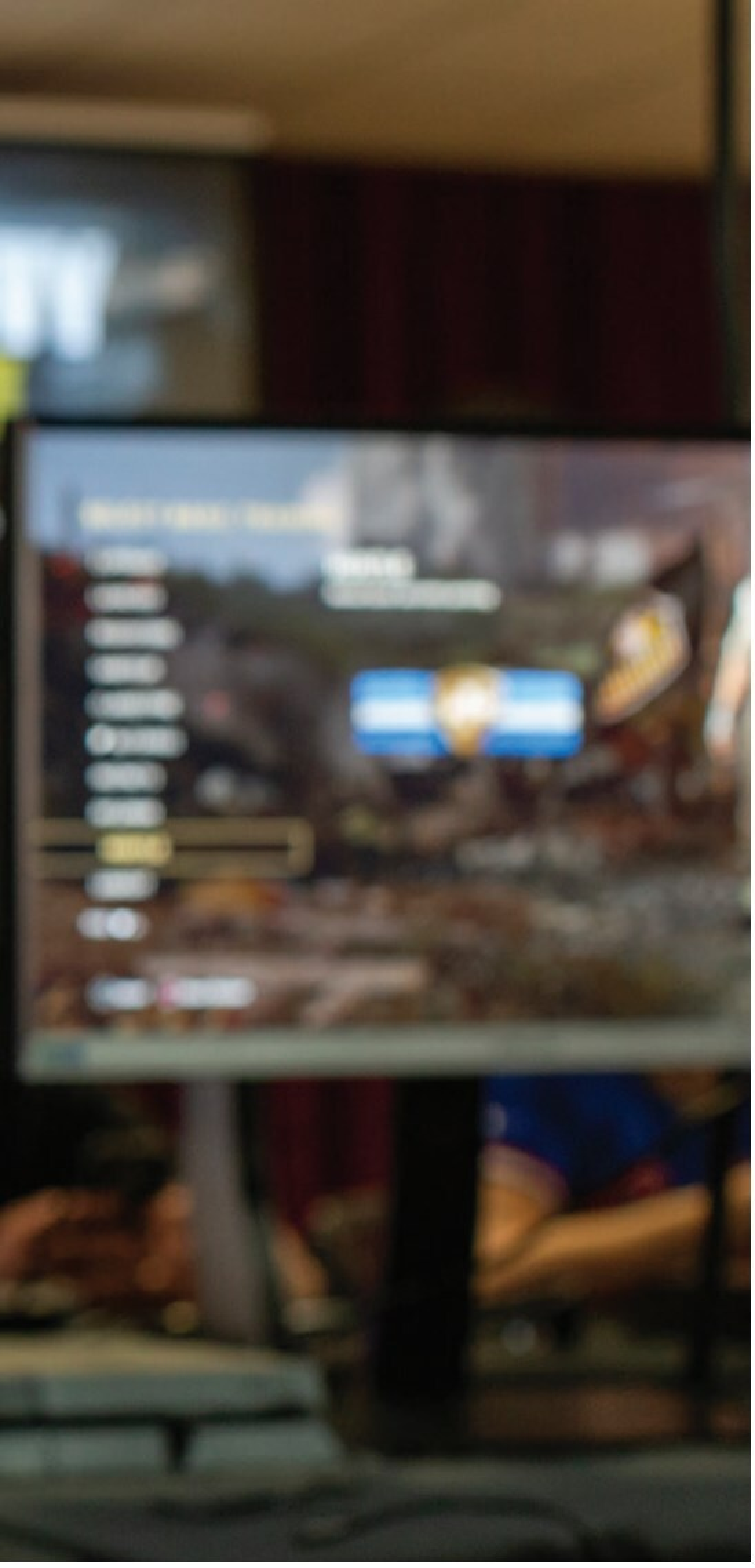
"The military is the easiest job anyone could have, regardless of how scary it is," says Elvis Walden, assistant director of the military video game charity Stack Up. "They tell you when and where to be, and they tell you how to dress. That's it. It's a very simple job. There's a lot of structure to it. Everyone has a place. Everyone has a purpose. So, when you come out into the civilian world from military life, it's all dog eat dog, with no one really looking out for our best interests anymore. And that's the hard part."

According to Walden, there's not enough research being done on veteran transition, and the research that is being done isn't focused on understanding modern veterans. "Veteran suicides are outnumbering the rest of the population in the U.S. The problem is there's a stigma that you're a warrior. That you can't show mental weakness or that you're no longer useful for the military. Realizing that you yourself need help is the most powerful tool you can have."

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there are more than 20 million veterans in the United States. Around four million are disabled and, according to the Bureau of Labor, there are nearly 400,000 unemployed veterans today. However, charities like Stack Up and the Call of Duty Endowment, Activision's military charity, are actively working to use the power of games to help soldiers transition into post-military living.

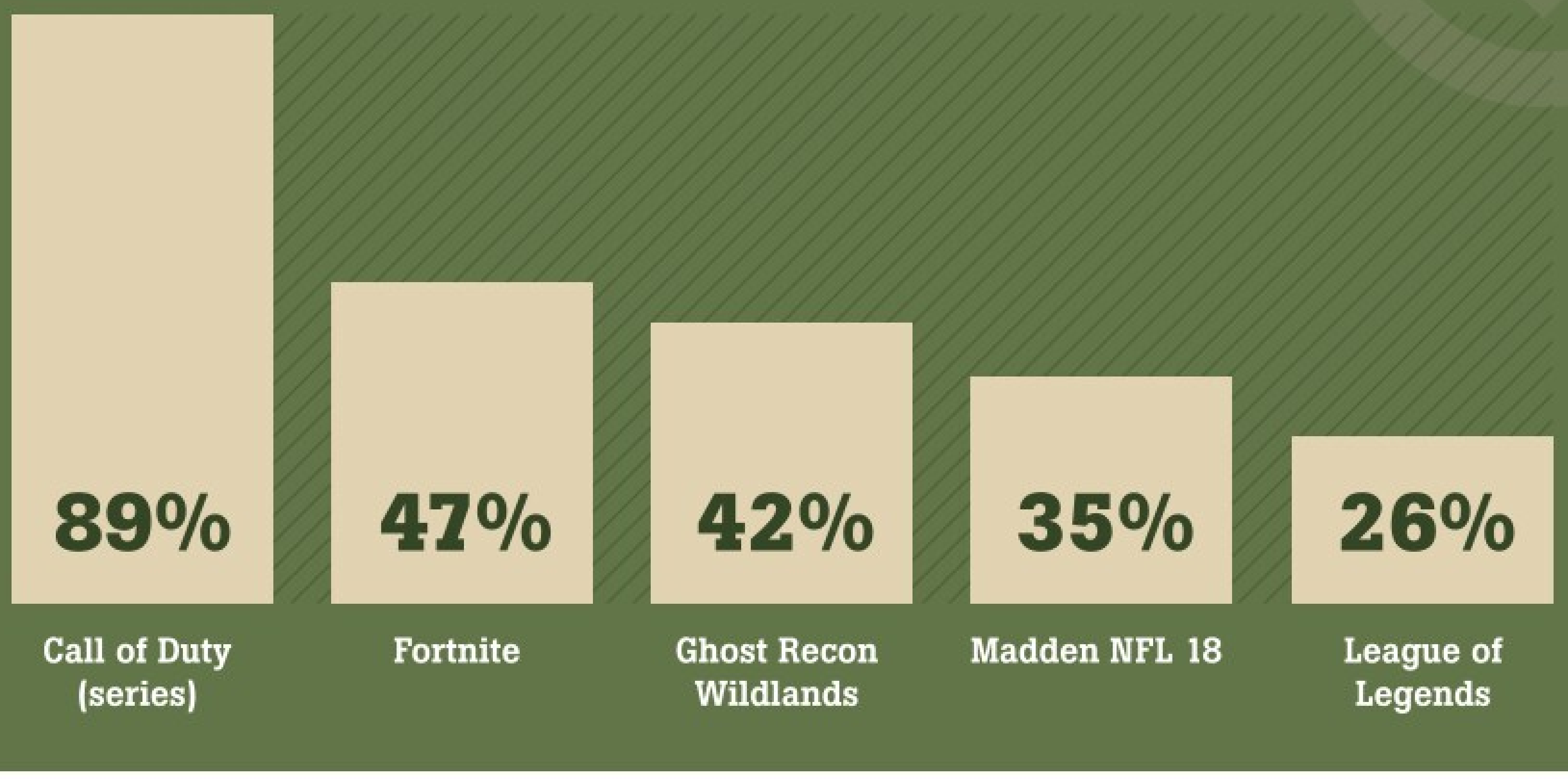
Dan Goldenberg, the executive director of the Call of Duty Endowment, says the charity's goal is to find other charities that have proven to be efficient in helping veterans find jobs and give them money. "We thought we could use analytic techniques to find the best nonprofits in the country and if we did that, we could help a lot more veterans than had been helped to that point," he says. "Since inception we've helped give out about $30 million in grants and helped over 43,000 vets find high quality jobs."

However, more than the practical aid of charity, gaming helps on a social and emotional



Crunching The Numbers

We asked all the soldiers we interviewed in Germany and Kuwait what they play on the regular. Here were the five titles that popped up the most in those conversations.



'TIS BUT A SCRATCH!

Mary Dague used video games to help overcome her traumatic disability and still uses them to decompress

level, with Walden calling video games “a Rosetta stone” for civilians and military members to converse in a common language that makes it easier for vets to adjust socially. For soldiers like 13-year Army vet Bryce Dubee, teamwork-based games make it easier for them to relive those specific elements. “I gravitate toward things that have good, cooperative elements,” he says. “That’s something I miss from the military and even talking with my friends, they do the same, saying, ‘I like having that communication and being on a team, and I love when a game has that kind of thing.’ Whether it’s a Destiny raid, or playing as a group in Overwatch or Fortnite.”

Video games also help those who come home wounded deal with the fallout of their disabilities. Mary Dague, a former bomb-disposal expert, lost both her arms hugging a bomb to protect her fellow soldiers. Cheery and upbeat, Dague uses games to help weather stressful times. “After I lost both my arms I remember waking up in the hospital and being bored, so I asked the nurse to grab my PSP out of my bag and everyone just stared at me,” she says. “And then it clicked: I don’t have hands! So I had about a year, year and a half, where I went in and out of depression because video gaming had been a lifestyle, a coping mechanism.” Dague eventually learned how to play games by laying herself on an sectional and playing with her amputated limbs. She currently helps runs a streaming group called DrinkinBrosGaming and raises money for charity, citing games as an important part of her daily routine. “[Games] are how I decompress and recharge my batteries.”

For Dague and a huge number of people currently or formerly in the service, video games are more than just pastime. Gaming is an emotional anchor, something that makes the hurdles of day-in, day-out monotony, as well as coming home again, a little bit more bearable, whether it’s through virtual escapism or reconnecting to someone you shared a piece of your life with years ago. All around the world this interactive medium burgeons, influencing lives and culture in ways big and small, but perhaps there is nowhere where you can better see the intensity of its emotional impact than in the lives of the men and women of the armed forces.

opinion

We Need New Kids On The Block

Why is triple-A still hangin' tough?

by Dean Evans and Gabriela Salvatore

The triple-A games industry has often been told to grow up, but the sentiment seems to have gotten lost in translation. Instead, the industry has opted for a secondary definition, an "M" for Mature. A place where the stamp of a capital M means earnestly spouting some choice "f--ks" over a Tarantino adjacent bloodbath.

While emotionally stunted and formulaic games continue to sell into the tens of millions, a larger movement is gaining traction. Outside of triple-A, collaborative, empathetic, and imaginative games attract millions of players, yet some gatekeepers are preventing these triple-A companies from embracing these trends. We call them "Design-o-Saurs."

With a collective 25 years between us in various roles at many studios, we've been lucky enough to work with many phenomenal individuals pushing for change. Yet inevitably, lurking in the foreground is the Design-o-Saur, plodding through the development cycle of countless titles.

We've seen them sneer at suggestions outside of the 80-plus rated Metacritic sphere. Roll their eyes and loudly groan at offbeat ideas during presentations. Actively seek conflict where there should be collaboration. These people are obsessed with replicating (or is it prolonging?) their own childhoods, as opposed to enriching someone else's. They have no interest in making a game that isn't made for them specifically.

This stubborn and predictable neoconservative carousel is where the Design-o-Saur thrives. Let's take E3 for example. E3 is a platform for the industry to talk to the world, an opportunity to showcase our innovation and art that will define the next year of interactive entertainment. Yet predictably, every year it features a complete lack of nuance and a whole lot of guns. While there's nothing wrong with enjoying the above, where are the educational games? Where are the titles free of cruelty? Where are the games to attract non-players? Where are the games for kids? Actually, where are the kids at all?

According to statistics, they're all playing or watching Minecraft (sitting at more than 140 million players and 53 billion YouTube video views). Several Design-o-Saurs we've met argue Minecraft is not a game. It has no goals, objectives, or challenge. There's a "peaceful" setting. Isn't that cheating if there's no loss state? In an effort to better define ourselves as an industry, we've created this set of stringent rules. While this rulebook has given us a common vocabulary, for too long has it been treated as a bible. Design-o-Saurs are game-design evangelists – reluctant to challenge the status quo.

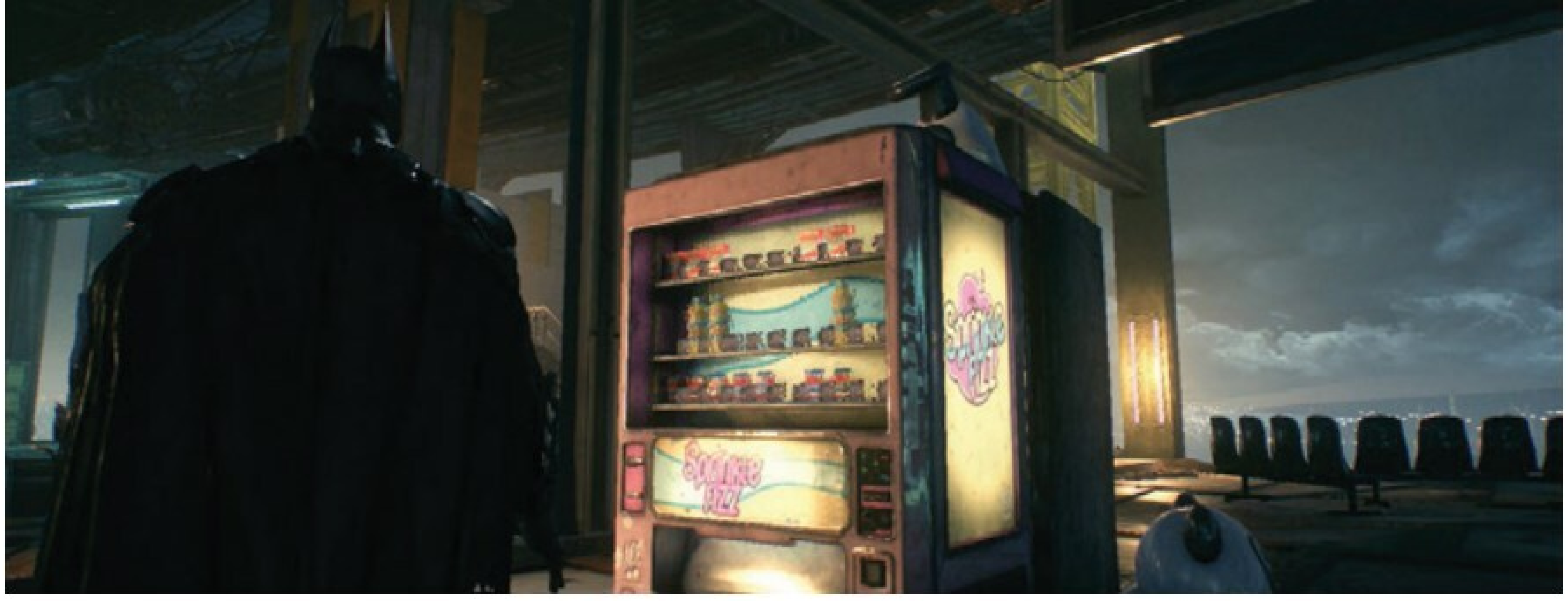
But that's exactly the type of experience we should be offering. Play is about *pushing* boundaries, *testing* rules, *not* being fenced in. Exploration and expression are at the core of development and growth. Why are we restricting ourselves creatively to make "gamers" feel comfortable? Why not more platforms and programs from triple-A studios for people to express themselves and create content outside of these rigid rules of what a game is?

This YouTube generation, iGeneration, or whatever you want to call it, has more access to each other and the world than any generation before it. A recent report by Google describes them as "the most informed, evolved, and empathetic generation of its kind." This is a generation of future innovators, of leaders, of creators, and we are doing them a disservice by churning out the same bleak experience year after year. An experience that young people will continue to consume if we offer no engaging alternative. When presented with arguably the most powerful and influential medium on the planet, why is the most pervasive creative concept shared amongst triple-A the ability to kill one another? In a country where gun violence confidently dominates the news cycle, why have we as an industry chosen to mindlessly replicate this brutality when we have ample opportunity to offer respite from it? Our responsibility as industry veterans is to provide future generations with the support, tools, and encouragement to express themselves that they're desperately craving (again, Minecraft sales currently sit at over 144 million). This isn't a quest to eliminate the standard video game fare, but a call to create content curated for a neglected audience.

To avoid extinction, the Design-o-Saurs need to evolve, grow feathers, take flight, and soar. Embrace new and different ideas. Play games they normally wouldn't play. Read books outside of their experiences. Watch a movie they've never ever heard of. Take an interest in criticism, crave it. Encourage and empower those with less. Promote their stories, their worlds, and their visions. Give them the tools and the confidence to share those same visions with others. Listen to others. Listen to different perspectives. Listen to people they've ignored. Listen to kids – no really, listen.

As developers, we must know that our job in the end is to pass the torch. Pass it with joy, pass it with excitement. Hand it down with pride to something new, interesting and scary. Don't let it fizzle out with old and tired ideas, let it burn bright with confidence, empathy and wonder.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the authors and not necessarily those of Game Informer. Dean Evans and Gabriela Salvatore are the co-founders of Beans, a new creative solutions team. Feel free to contact them at complaints@thebeansteam.com



The Virtual Soda Machine Collector

Here's how a video game environment staple turned into a study of consumerism

Jess Morrissette is a professor of political science at Marshall University in West Virginia, but that's just his day job. He also collects and archives in-game screenshots of every soda machine that has ever appeared in a video game. It started as a joke with Morrissette sharing a screenshot of Batman: Arkham Knight's Sprinkle-Fizz soda machine on twitter, musing that someone should create a website to track video game soda machines. That joke turned into a real website which now features more than 2,000 video game soda machines, and Morrissette has even found a way to incorporate his strange hobby into his political science studies.

Name:
Jess Morrissette

Location:
Huntington,
West Virginia

Occupation:
Political Science
Professor at
Marshall University

Twitter:
@decafjedi

Website:
vgsmproject.com

interview by Kyle Hilliard

Do you like video games that don't have soda machines in them?
[Laughs] Absolutely. I have been a lifelong gamer and I've done a little bit of amateur game development myself.

You say this all started as a joke, but now this weird hobby has turned into a legitimate website. Is it a burden to maintain?
It's a weird hobby. Just hosting costs per year is probably less than $50, just to keep it up and running. It's a hobby, but it's also something I have sort of merged into my professional work as a political scientist. I've been writing about it and talking a bit about the broader socio-cultural meaning of soda machines. I am actually presenting a paper on that at the annual convention of the Popular Culture Association.

How does running a website tracking video game soda machines tie into political science academia?
The main way that I have talked about it up to this point is thinking in terms of how video games attempt to establish a sense of presence; to make us feel like we're there; to make us feel immersed; to make these virtual worlds feel more like the real world. And as I started to collect more and more of these video game soda machines it became apparent that this was such a familiar trope in so many games. Over 2,000 games are archived now on my site, it started occurring to me, "Wow! This seems to be something that game developers fall back on a lot in an effort to create virtual spaces that remind us of the real world." And then the question that came from there was, well what does that say about the real world if, for a game to seem real to us, we have to be surrounded by symbols of consumerism? Which is what I argue video game soda machines ultimately are. They are replicating, in these game worlds, the same sort of outward signifiers of a consumerist society in the virtual space. So that's my connection back to political science and social sciences in general. It's just talking about what it says when a virtual world only feels real if we're surrounded by capitalism while we're in it.

If you're playing a game for fun and you come across a soda machine, is that an exciting moment? Or do you have to drop everything and update your site?
It's still a little exciting. I spend so much time trying to track down ones I know are there that coming across those surprises is always pleasant. When Overwatch recently released their Blizzard world map – I'm a big Overwatch fan. I was excited to go in and test out this new map – and while I was in the spawn room in Blizzard World, I noticed, "Oh hey! There is a soda machine with Murloc on it!" and it doesn't appear anywhere else in the game. "That's kind of great! I can grab a quick screenshot of that," go ahead and play my round, and when I'm done I can go ahead and add it to the website.

Do you have a favorite machine?
That's tough. One of my favorites is probably one of the first I remember encountering in a game, from The Secret of Monkey Island. The Grog machines that were there. Just in the sense that they were anachronistic and this is a game set during the golden age of Caribbean piracy and for some reason there is a vending machine that looks an awful lot like a Coke machine with this pirate-y grog drink. That's one of my favorites.

Do you own a real soda machine?
I own a replica Fallout Nuka-Cola mini fridge.

GOD OF WAR

For years, Kratos was defined by his anger. That made for exciting games, but also didn't leave much room for character development. With the latest God of War, Sony's Santa Monica studio changed that, presenting a new vision for Kratos. He is more restrained, wrestling with his past while figuring out how to be a father. These were challenging (and risky) steps, but it all seems to have paid off. God of War received widespread acclaim, and we talked to creative director Cory Barlog about the game's big moments, what didn't make the cut, and the pressure of keeping secrets. **Note: This interview contains major spoilers for God of War.** *by Joe Juba*

You've been vague about how Kratos made the transition from the Greek world to the Norse world, and this game doesn't clear that up. Is that story not worth telling, or it was it just not necessary for this game?
It's something that, in certain things, we are going to explore. But it is a story that is worth telling at a certain time. For me, that story is part of how he meets Faye, and that is a really near and dear story to my heart and I want to do it justice. After finishing the game, you can see that I didn't want a lot of the stuff that comes out in the game to have to be explained when you meet Faye. I kind of want you to go into that situation knowing a little more than Kratos does, if we ever get a chance to tell that story. To me, it's a fairly well developed story that I want to tell. It is the dark times. It focuses heavily on Kratos hitting rock bottom. His transition from Greece to there – he goes through a pretty heavy emotional rollercoaster. I look at the order in which the story needs to be told, and I really feel like this story helps the set for whenever we tell the next one.

What's up with those extra, conspicuously locked realms?
Oh, you noticed that, did you? [laughs] We knew as we were making the game, in order to build out for multiple stories, we were carving out and reserving some for later parts of the journey. But I still wanted to stay true to the fact that there are nine realms, and I didn't want them to be nonexistent. We struggled a lot to find the right language to make it clear to the player that, while you can see them, this is not what the game is about. These three realms are there to make you wonder.

So those realms are definitely not DLC?
Oh, totally. Those are really big deals. To me, they're tantalizing hints. If we get a chance to make another [God of War] – which would be super-exciting – the story shall continue. We have mapped out a lot of how we want this stuff to connect.

Can you say anything about DLC plans at this point?
For me, the big part of this game was to deliver, in the one game box, every single thing we wanted to deliver. While I kind of like continuing the adventure, I would much prefer that the development team – if we got a chance to go on to another one – focus on making the next one bigger and better and badder. But there was definitely a lot of things I had to scope out over the five years of this project. If I ever did want to go back and do DLC, I would probably pick among some of those cool things to do. But at this point, yeah, there's no plan for any DLC.

Despite many stories about a whole pantheon of other gods, the game does not have many active characters. Is the idea to start small and scale up in the future?
When you look at the franchise as a whole, you'd think, "Oh, cool, this is the eighth game, so it should be continuing that trend of expansion."

But because we started over on so much, we kind of look at this as the first one, and we limit the number of characters. Because I think the quality of the character interactions and development can be so much higher when you limit it to ensure that you have enough time for each of these characters to meaningfully develop. What people will most likely compare it to is, "But I played God of War III, and there was just god after god after monster!" Yes, because that was the logical progression of the third one, and we had reached the time for the *Avengers: Infinity War* of those games. But you're not going to start with *Infinity War*. So, it was very deliberate to limit the scope of the characters.

As one of the few well-known Norse gods, you must have known people would be on the lookout for Loki's appearance. Did this influence your approach to that figure's implementation?
Well, it was an interesting thing, because in the beginning, Atreus was not intended to be Loki. I was still figuring out the name "Atreus," and no sooner did I get the name figured out than the writers Matt Sophos and Rich Gaubert had a brainstorm on the way to work. They both came to my office and said, "I have a pitch for you." That pitch ended up being the exact line we used in the game: You finish the mural, you spread the ashes, and you're coming back when Atreus says, "One thing that was weird, they kept getting my name wrong on the wall. They kept calling me…'Loki'?" And it was that one piece, no set-up, and I was just: "mind blown." I was like, "This is what we've been missing." Because there's this B-story in the game about identity. How much of ourselves do we show our children? But also this concept of reinvention; Kratos going to a new land is like when you go to college and you can be somebody else, because nobody knows you there and you can reinvent yourself and have control or agency over how the world perceives you. And that [Loki reveal] gave me the opportunity at the end of the game to have an opening.

When we visited the studio, people made it sound like that no-cut camera was a lot of work. Now, in retrospect, do you think it was worth the effort?
Unequivocally, yes. It was hard, but it was also something that I've been wanting to do for quite some time… All the engineers, artists, and designers I work with are just so amazing. And they all saw the difficulty, and once they realized that I was totally resolved and I wasn't going to change, I think they did get on board. But for me, 100-million-percent, it was worth it. If for nothing else, that a film director didn't come in and direct a game and do it before I did.

Do you see that as part of the series' identity now? Would you ever do it again?
Yeah, I think it's like the cinematic camera that was initially part of the first God of War. It set a unique standard; though games like Devil May Cry and Onimusha were doing this, I think God of War took a next step for cinematic camera placement and did things where you were just tiny on the screen and tried to push that farther. I think what we've done with this new camera is begin the evolution of how we're going to handle it. I think it's only going to get better in any further iterations.

You managed to keep the Blades of Chaos secret for a long time…
We knew way back in August 2013 that the blades were going to be part of the game, and they just weren't going to be part of the whole game. That was a really hard secret to keep. There were a lot of secrets that were difficult to keep, but this one kept me up at night making sure no one would give that away. Because that moment was so dear to me. I had such a clear vision for how I wanted all of that to play out. It would have just broken my heart if everyone had gone into the game knowing exactly what was going to happen.

What impact did you want that moment to have, that keeping the secret was so important?
They were placed at a point in the game where I was hoping (and was really working hard to orchestrate) that you just sort of forgot about it and let it go. So even if you spent the first two or three hours of the game going, "I hope we get the blades!" by the sixth hour, you're like, "Okay, cool. I guess they're not gonna do it, and that's fine." And at that moment in the narrative, when the stakes have elevated so high, and that Kratos is being asked to essentially take back on the bonds of servitude to the gods that ruined his life in order to save his son's life – it's just so much emotional weight in that moment. And it's not just what's happening onscreen, but what people bring to the experience, whether you've played God of War before or not.

One of the few things I've seen complaints about is the map. Was it always intended to serve as a more general reference? Did you experiment with iterations that provided more information?
From the beginning, when we started talking about the map, one of the things I wanted was a hand-drawn map, like what Atreus might draw when you're there. It's meant to be an idea of location and orientation without being Google Maps. I did not want people constantly opening the map and following it to get where they needed to go. I wanted them to observe the environment, because I wanted opportunities for them to get lost. I wanted them to make a turn and go, "Wait a minute, what's this? Wow!" It was always meant to just be that general guide, because encouraging curiosity and discovery was so important. Exploration was so important in this game. And the exploration isn't, "follow the dot and then you'll arrive at the location." It's much more, "Generally, over there by the Thor stature, there might be something." It makes you wonder, and you engage with the world on a level that almost feels more real when you're not simply following the GPS coordinates.

Why no New Game Plus, crazy costumes, or other post-game rewards?
We prioritized stability and bug-fixing as much as we could before we started getting into these others things – which we love, but they just became a smaller priority … It's stuff we love to do, and a lot times with the previous games, it's because we had extra time at the end. Other people were working, but the modelers and riggers were kind of free, because they were done a couple months before release. That just wasn't the case on this game. It was literally everybody working until the last second on every aspect. So we found ourselves having to say, "These are great things. These are hallmarks of the franchise, and we love them. But we need to make the core game awesome. That is never the second priority."

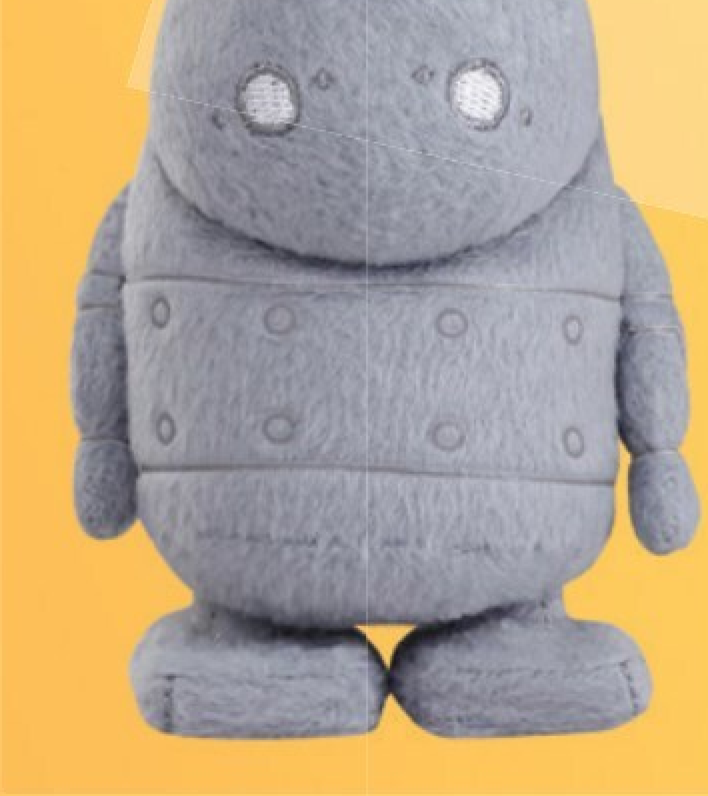
If you had a couple extra months (and the necessary stamina) to change or polish the game before release, what would have been your first priority?
It's hard to say, because if we had a couple of extra months, it would have been eaten up by tightening different aspects of the game. Unless we said, "You have a couple extra months, and you're already to the point where you think you're done." What would I do with that additional time? Then I would do tons of additional armors and skins and fun stuff like that. But unfortunately, a couple months wouldn't have saved some of the awesome things I had to get rid of earlier in development. There were entire dungeons. Muspelheim is one-third the size of its original design. That volcano was so much larger! And it was such an intensely fulfilling and crazy experience … but it was also really difficult to get that done. We looked at it and went "This is amazing, but we kinda overdid it and made a gigantic mountain." That would have been unrealistic even with another six months, I think. ◆

For Growing Gamers

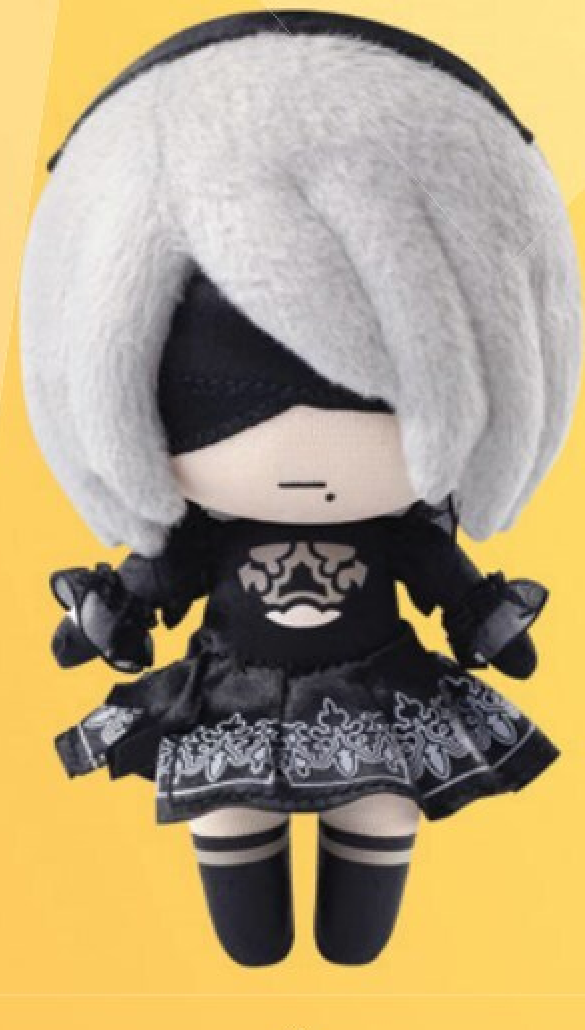
by Robbie Key

It might be a while before your toddler picks up a controller, but you can kick-start their love for games with the myriad video game plushies on the market. Companies like Nintendo, PlayStation, Square-Enix, Blizzard, and Capcom have a wealth of stuffed characters, animals, and even inanimate objects covering franchises like Undertale, Persona, and Halo. We're particularly fond of the 12-inch polyester plush of Morgana from Persona 5, which has a weighted bottom and is the perfect cuddle companion when going to sleep early.

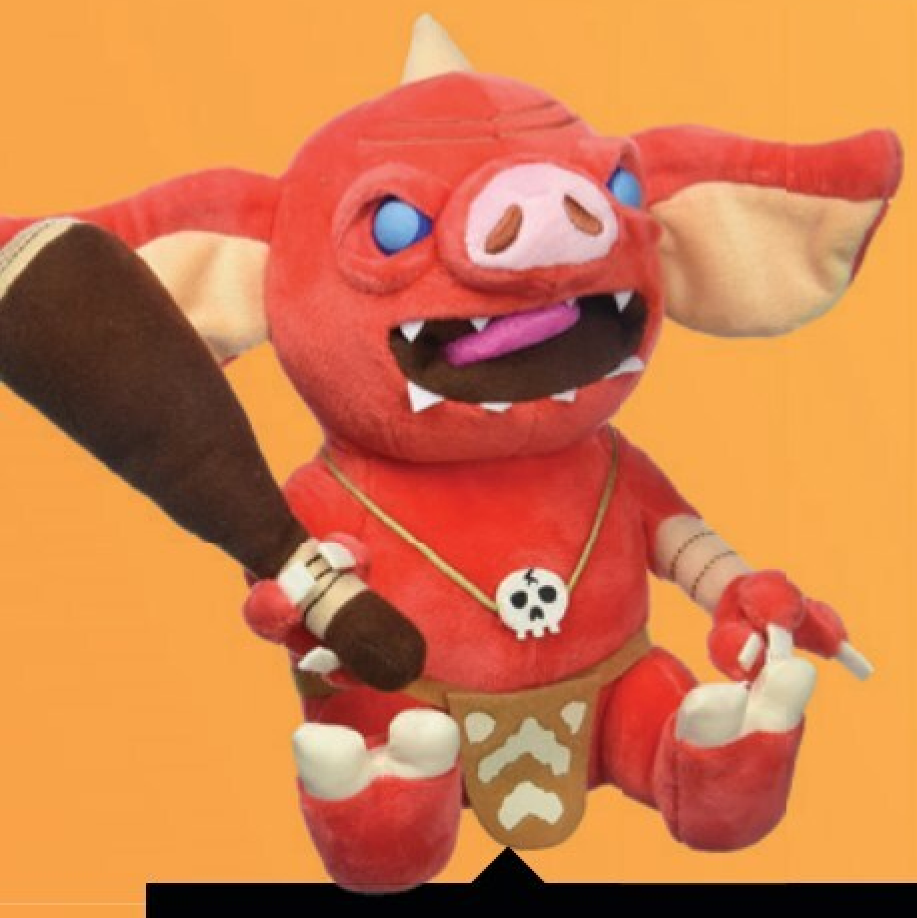
Morgana
$45.00 | shop.atlus.com



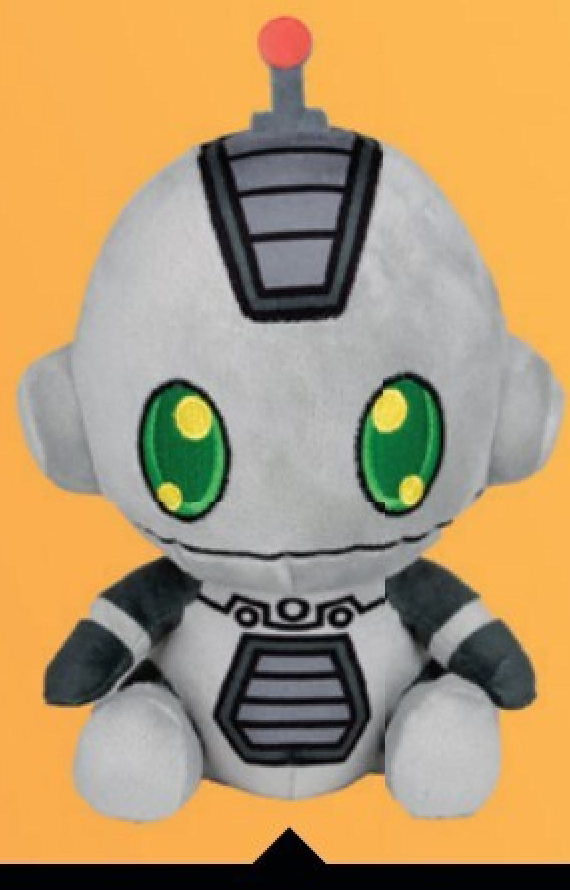
Machine Lifeform
$19.99 | store.na.square-enix.com



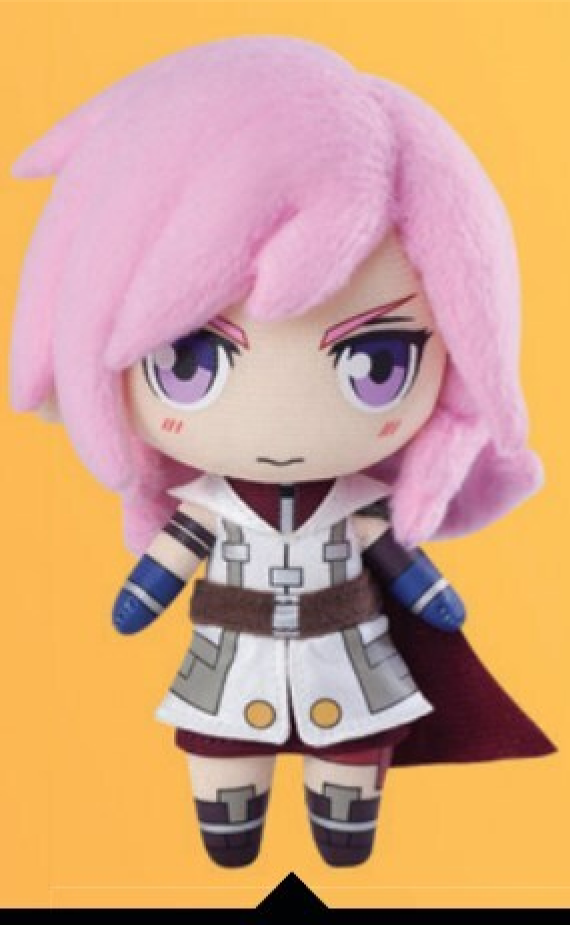
2B
$23.99 | store.na.square-enix.com



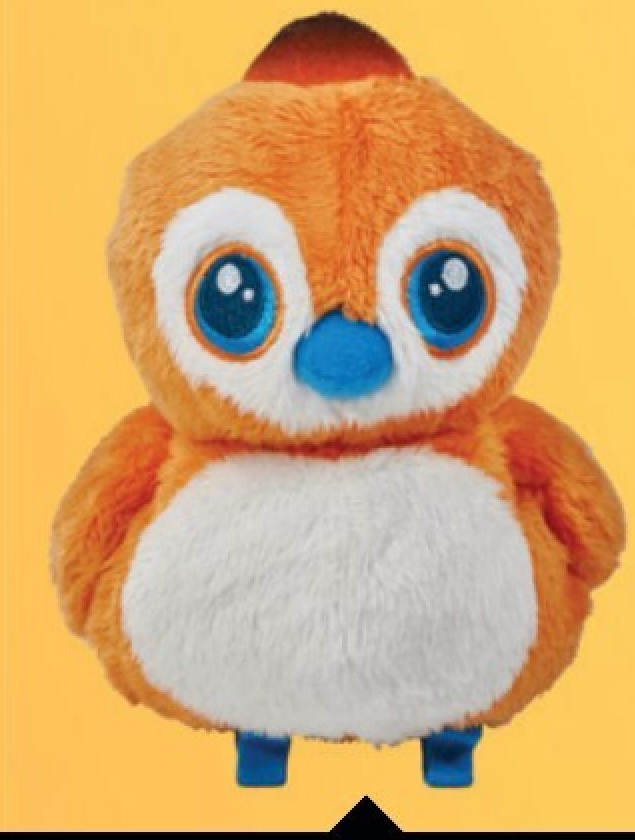
Bokoblin
$24.99 | store.nintendo.com



Clank
$5.99 | gear.playstation.com



Lightning
$19.99 | store.na.square-enix.com



Pepe
$20.00 | gear.blizzard.com

1 Nintendo-themed Build-A-Bears

As if Pokémon weren't already irresistibly huggable, Build-A-Bear has evolved them to a new level of cuteness. Your toddler can choose among popular pocket monsters like Pikachu, Charmander, Squirtle, and Bulbasaur – just like players did in the original games. Accessories such as hoodies and voice boxes allow your child's mon to be the very best, like no one ever was. If you're more of a Mario Bros. fan, take the warp pipe to a land of teddy bears modeled after Italian plumbers and peachy princesses.

Starting at $25.00 | buildabear.com

2 Chocobo and Moogle Hooded Blankets

Until scientists can genetically engineer real chocobos or moogles, these hooded blankets for Final Fantasy's feathered friends and money tycoons make fine substitute companions for your little kupo. These shaggy plush blankets will keep your child as warm as a Chocobo after a swift race across the fields of Eos.

$49.99 | store.na.square-enix.com

3
FORZA MOTORSPORT
FORZA MOTORSPORT
FORZA MOTORSPORT
FORZA MOTORSPORT
FORZA MOTORSPORT

3 Forza Motorsport And Gran Turismo Hot Wheels

Forza Motorsport and Gran Turismo have competed for racing dominance for years, but now you can bring that race into the real world with these sweet Hot Wheels modeled after cars featured in both games. For a more immersive experience, we suggest you and your kids make motor sounds as they race through the living room.

$3.99 | hotwheels.mattel.com

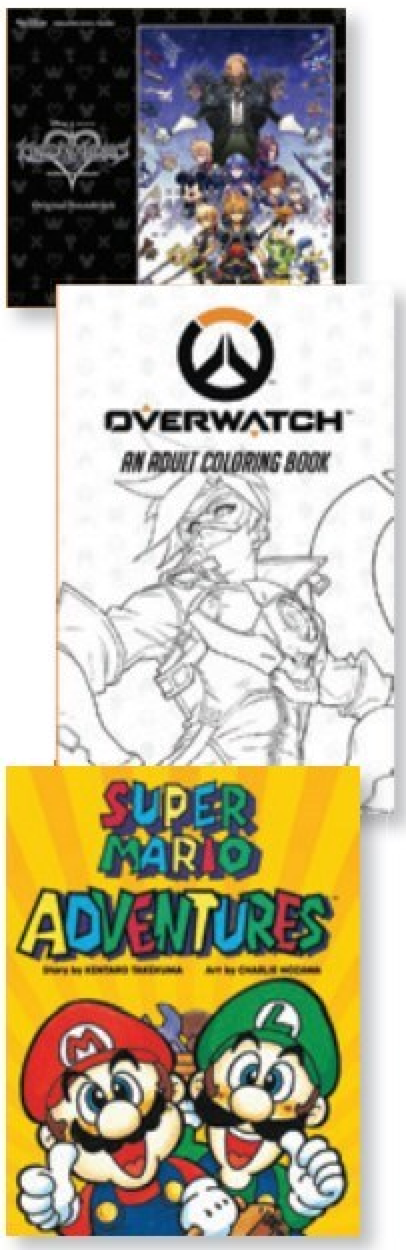
4 Onesies To Rule Them All

You might think your baby could do a better job staying on the payload than the average Overwatch rando, so let your kids start training early with these official D.Va and Lucio onesies, which read "Nerf this" and "Let's drop the beat." Alternatively, you can dress them in an Assassin's Creed onesie, if you'd like them to start practicing the art of silence.

$19.99
gear.blizzard.com, store.ubi.com

4
HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT
NERF THIS

Media Shelf



KINGDOM HEARTS 1.5 + 2.5 SOUNDTRACK

"Simple and Clean" is the first Kingdom Hearts theme song. It's also the best way to describe this massive soundtrack from 1.5 and 2.5 collections. Many of the game's original, serene songs are the perfect sleepy-time tunes for naptime.

$79.99
store.na.square-enix.com

OVERWATCH COLORING BOOK

Heroes never die in the minds of children, and the memories of your children's drawings can live on forever in this Overwatch coloring book. Blizzard has a variety of epic skins for all of Overwatch's heroes, but your kids can craft their own unique color combinations.

$12.95
gear.blizzard.com

SUPER MARIO BROS. ADVENTURES

Viz resurrects and collects Kentaro Takekuma's classic comic from *Nintendo Power Magazine*. Follow Mario and Luigi as they race to prevent Bowser and Peach from getting married. This bedtime story is full of wonderful moments and whimsical artwork.

$14.99
viz.com

VANTAGE
VANTAGE

GAINING THE PERFECT VANTAGE

Breaking down Scuf's new, professional-grade PS4 controller

Years ago, third-party controllers were cheap peripherals consumers tolerated to save a buck. But since 2011, Scuf has been flipping that script with a series of high-end customizable controllers with programmable back paddles and adjustable thumbsticks.

by Ben Reeves

"When Scuf came along and added additional function to the controller, it became a legitimate way for people to use more of the hand," says Scuf CEO and co-founder Duncan Ironmonger. "We changed the model from the third-party being the cheaper alternative to the third-party being the more expensive option, because you're getting more functionality."

For Scuf's newest innovation, the company teamed up with Sony to produce one of its most expensive and fully featured controllers. Scuf Vantage will retail for $169.95 (wired) or $199.95 (wireless). While some consumers might scoff at the price point, the process of creating this controller was not cheap.

"This is something that we've spent many millions of dollars developing," Ironmonger says. "Every component used and every new feature here is designed for performance and for customization. The only thing that wasn't Scuf on our previous controller was the internal circuit board. But with this, we've licensed the Sony chipset, so that allows us to talk directly to PlayStation. Everything else has really been designed for performance and competitive play."

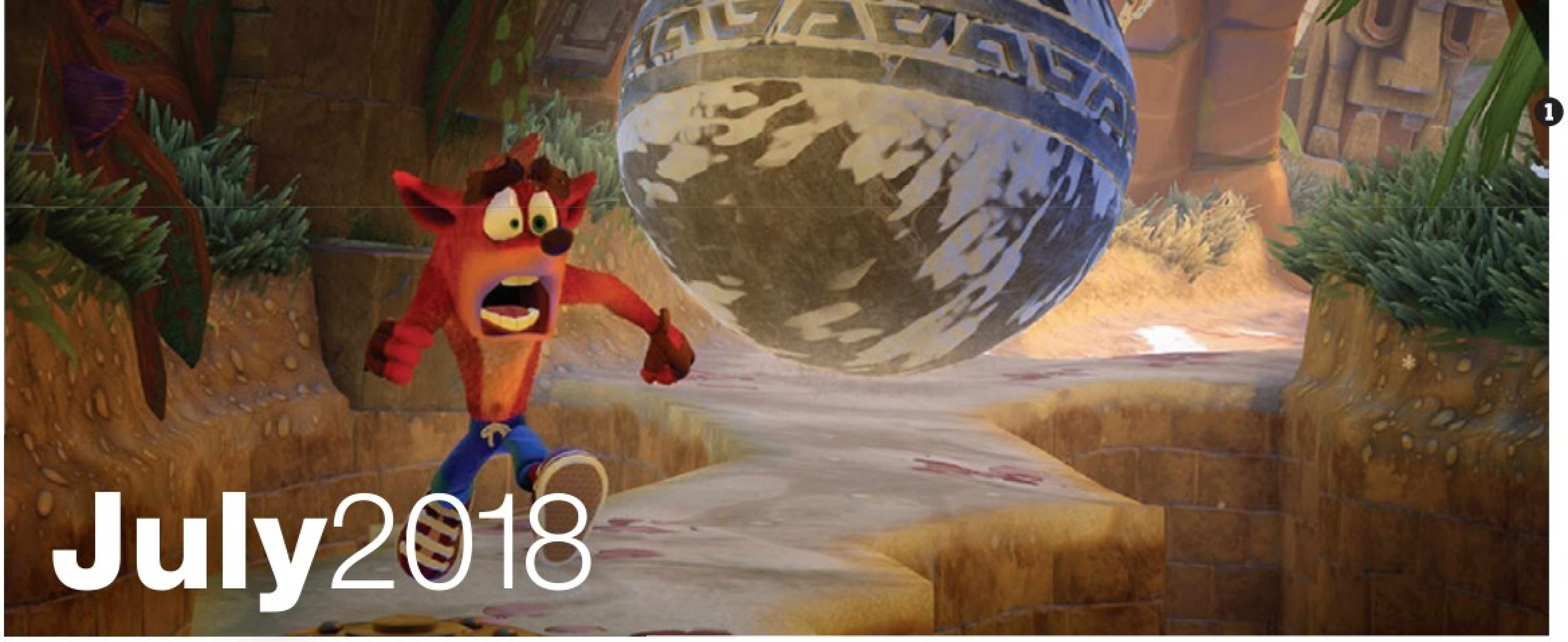
Scuf says the Vantage features more than 15 unique features designed to elevate anyone's skills in competitive circles. One of the Vantage's newest features is its twin sax buttons. Scuf modeled these side buttons off a saxophone, and like the controller's four back paddles, these sax buttons can be reprogrammed to mimic any of the controller's other buttons.

The Vantage also features a removable magnetic faceplate, an interchangeable d-pad/control disc, and removable force-feedback modules. An audio touchbar at the front of the controller offers easy access to headset volume controls, and players can tap the touch bar to mute the mic.

Like all Scuf's controllers, consumers will be able to customize the Vantage's color schemes, plus the shape and length of the thumbsticks at purchase. Scuf hopes to start fulfilling preorders in August. ◆

Why Copy The Xbox Controllers' Analog Placement?

"We've done asymmetric thumbsticks – they're not together like normal PS4 controllers – and there are a couple of reasons we're doing that," says Scuf CEO and co-founder Duncan Ironmonger. "Pressing down on the left thumbstick is predominately used for sprinting in a lot of games, but as you push down, you need a reasonable amount of strength to push down and be comfortable. It takes a bit of endurance on the thumb for that. We found that when your thumbs are extended, your thumbs have a lot more power, so off-center thumbsticks feel good."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July2018

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 10
- Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy (Xbox One, Switch, PC) ❶
- MXGP Pro (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Shining Resonance Refrain (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Friday 13
- Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker (Switch, 3DS)
- Octopath Traveler (Switch)

Tuesday 17
- Adventure Time: Pirates of the Enchiridion (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- Sonic Mania Plus (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

Tuesday 24
- The Banner Saga 3 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- The Banner Saga Trilogy (PS4, Xbox One)
- Mega Man X Legacy Collection 1 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- Mega Man X Legacy Collection 2 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- The Persistence (PS4)
- WarioWare Gold (3DS)

❷

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Sunday 01
- Power (Starz)

Friday 06
- Ant-Man and the Wasp (theaters) ❷
- The Legacy of a Whitetail Deer Hunter (Netflix)
- Sacred Game (Netflix)

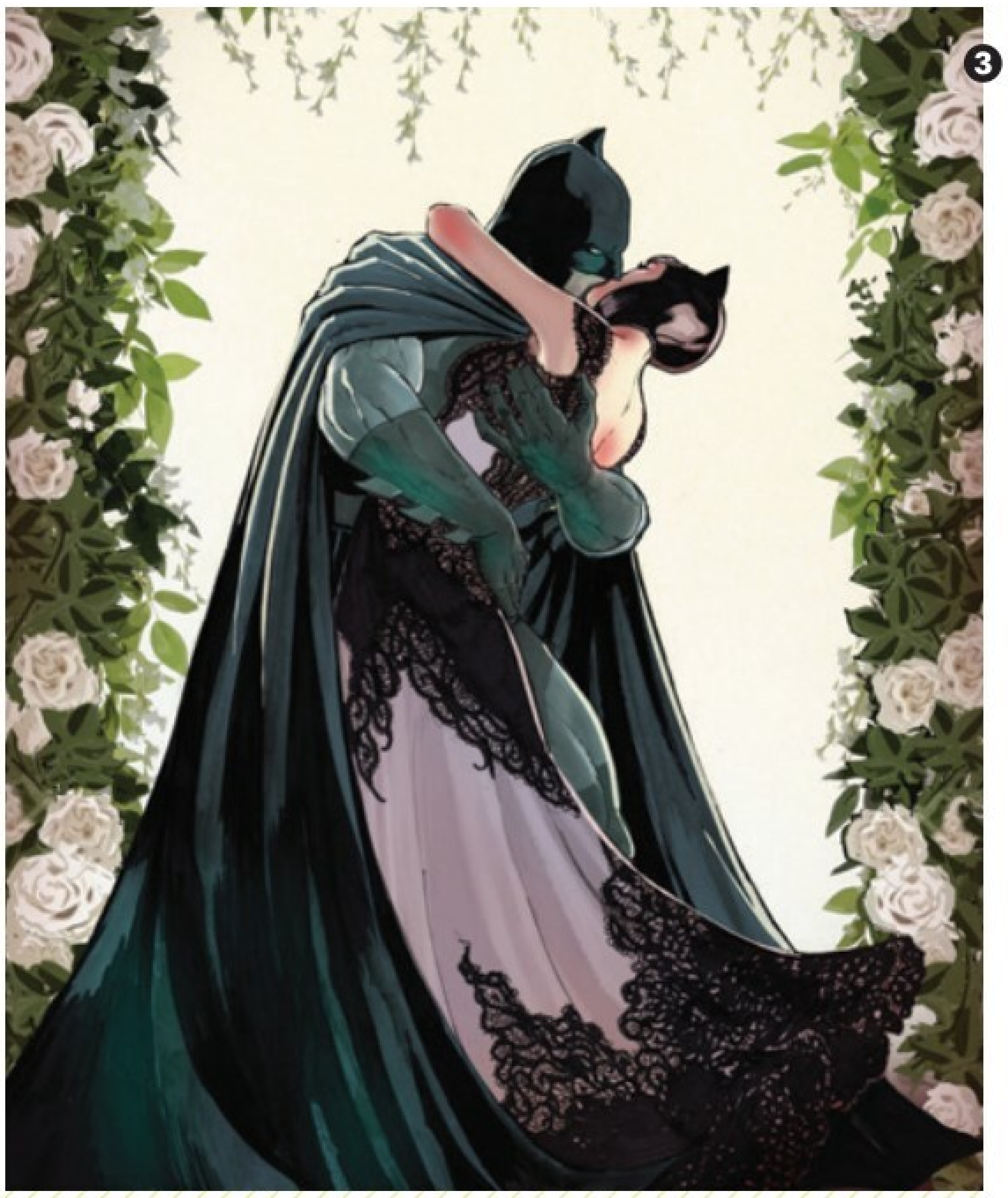
Tuesday 10
- The Outpost (CW)

Sunday 13
- Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation (theaters)
- Skyscraper (theaters)

Thursday 19
- The Grand Hustle (BET)

Friday 20
- Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again (theaters)
- Outcast (Cinemax)
- Mission: Impossible – Fallout (theaters)
- Teen Titans Go! to the Movies (theaters)

Tuesday 31
- Making It (NBC)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GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 04.1

Who Is Captain Marvel?

Avengers: Infinity War teased the introduction of a new hero. Captain Marvel will likely be a key player in the second chapter, and you can now read up on her origin story in The Life of Captain Marvel, a new ongoing comic-book series launching today. This origin story will give you a good idea of what to expect from Carol Danvers when she makes her big-screen debut.

Wednesday 04.2

Bat-Wedding ❸

Batman and Catwoman are getting married in Batman #50. The union is said to reshape Gotham City, but it looks like a few unexpected wedding crashers don't want it to happen. This milestone issue is double the size and ships with three different covers.

Friday 19

San Diego Comic Con

Marvel Studios won't be doing a big panel at this year's San Diego Comic Con, a break in tradition that points to the film company wanting to keep Avengers: Infinity War's sequel under lock and key. That just means Insomniac Games' Spider-Man can steal the spotlight. It's expected to be a big part of the show, which runs from July 19-22.

Thursday 26

Overwatch League Finals

The lengthy first season of Overwatch League concludes with the grand finals, beginning today and running for three days. The winning team receives a trophy and a $1 million dollar bonus to be divided between the players and coaches.

FLYING TO A NEW FRONTIER

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online Multiplayer Shooter

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
BioWare

» Release
February 22

How Anthem Explores A Different Kind Of Story

BY JOE JUBA

Storytelling plays an important role in shaping our favorite gaming experiences. However, the concept of "storytelling" is difficult to unpack, because it means so many things to different people. Is it the central plot that propels you through a game? Is it your hero's personal development? Is it the relationships that you form with other characters along the way? Is it about the players' opportunity to share their adventures?

If you play BioWare games, you're probably familiar with a certain set of answers to those questions. Through franchises like Mass Effect and Dragon Age, the studio has honed a signature approach to narrative that revolves around single-player exploits driven by a cast of unique companions. However, as memorable as those experiences are, they aren't the only way to get players invested in a world and its characters.

BioWare's new IP, Anthem, has unique answers to the questions about what storytelling means. Anthem is focused on co-op gameplay in a shared world, emphasizing adventures with real people by your side. While that

may run counter to your conception of what a BioWare game should be, Anthem also retains many powerful connections to the studio's legacy. From the time we spent playing the game, we encountered characters we want to know better, an interesting setting ripe for exploration, and battles full of impressive spectacle – all parts of the classic BioWare formula. Anthem may challenge your expectations, but in balancing the old and new, it leads fans into an untapped and dangerous world whose story doesn't need to end.

After the release of Mass Effect 3 in 2012, a small group within BioWare began laying the foundation for a brand-new franchise. Led by Mass Effect executive producer Casey Hudson (who left BioWare in 2014, but returned last year as the studio's general manager), this team was responsible not only for creating a new IP, but setting a new direction for the studio as a whole. To survive in the shifting gaming landscape, simply applying the same formula from previous games to a different setting wouldn't be enough – this next game needed to be an evolution.

"We were just thinking for many years, as we were finishing out the Mass Effect trilogy, about, 'Where should games go?'" Hudson says. "And one thing that we've always found is that shared experience is so important to a BioWare game. We don't write stories about just one character; it's always about being able to look over at your friend and see their reaction. Often it's an A.I. character – a fictional character. But that's the magic: Something happens, and you have these friends around you who have funny things to say."

In Anthem, you pilot powerful exosuits and use them to navigate a harsh world and complete missions as a team. It is designed as a cooperative game; it taps into that shared experience by swapping out the A.I. party members in favor of other players. Instead of embarking on an adventure with fictional companions, players bring their real friends along – a move partially inspired by fans' love of playing and discussing BioWare games together. The game is also a live service; the team will keep supporting it and adding post-launch content, so once you finish the critical path, you can keep coming back to the world to hunt for better gear and complete new challenges.

Anthem may appear to be chasing a trend with this approach. However, terminology like "shared-world shooter" was not commonplace when Anthem began development. In 2012, games like Destiny and The Division did not exist yet. "We were approaching it less from a point of view of dealing with competitors in the genre, and more about what we want to do in this space," says game director Jon Warner – another member of the small group that developed Anthem in its early stages. "When we started this journey that became Anthem, it was about exploring storytelling opportunities and providing a different setting for a BioWare-style experience."

After years of development, those goals have manifested in many ways throughout the gameplay, story, and systems. However, the easiest way to see Anthem's place in the BioWare catalogue is to examine the planet on which it takes place.

INTERCEPTOR

AN UNFINISHED WORLD

The world in Anthem is vast and volatile. At the time of its inception, gods known as Shapers used huge pieces of powerful technology to command a force called the Anthem of Creation, forming the planet. Then, they left. For reasons unknown, the Shapers abandoned their work unfinished and left their incomprehensible devices behind. Their legacy is pervasive, since enormous pieces of Shaper technology litter the landscape, and they are far from dormant. They seem to activate randomly, causing cataclysmic changes to the world and creating a hostile environment that makes daily life a constant struggle.

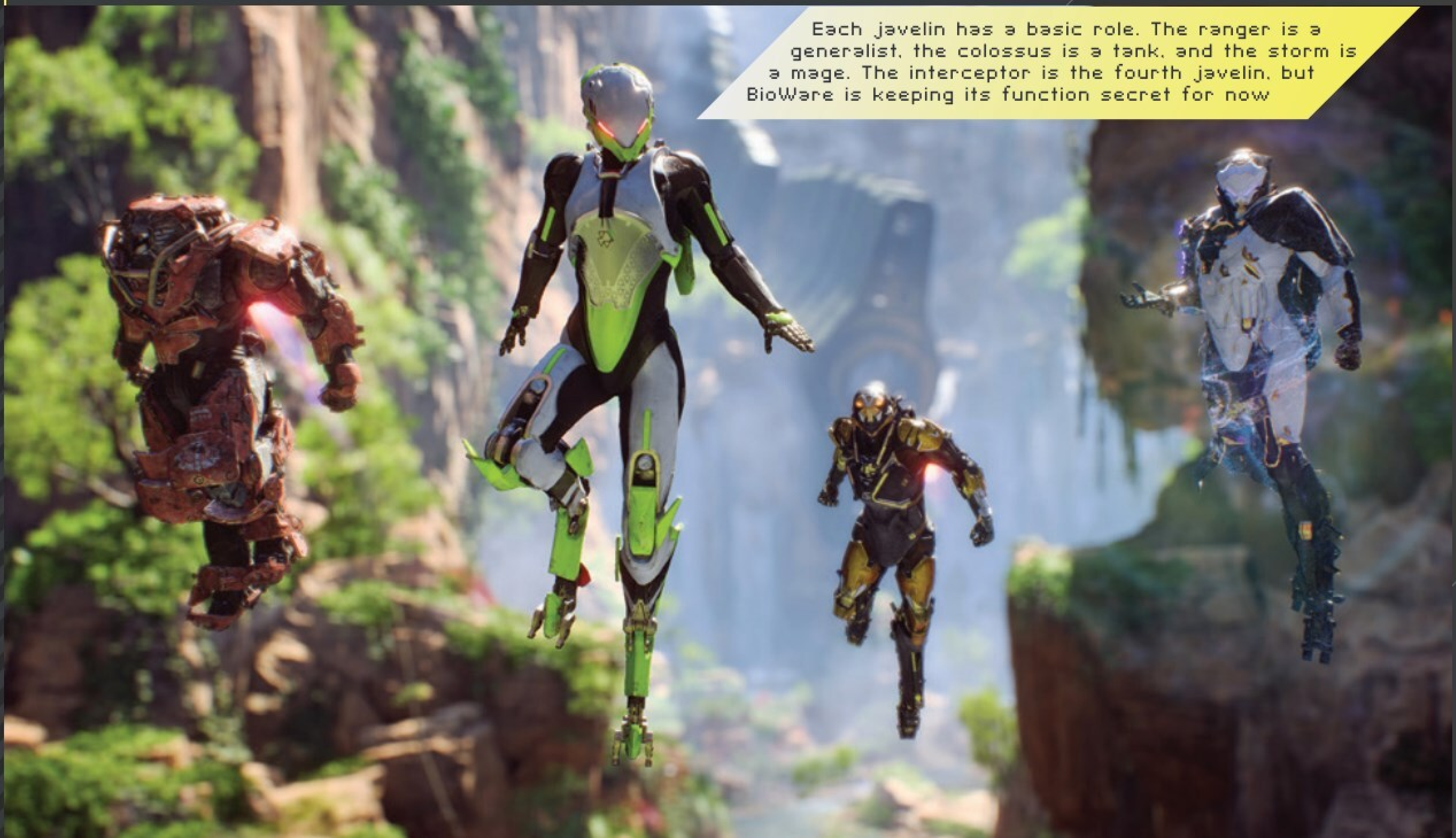
"This is a world that is stuck in the middle of its genesis," says executive producer Mark Darrah. "The tools are just laying out on the workbench, turning themselves on and off and causing the world to shift and change."

At least, that's one theory about the state of the planet (which has a name BioWare isn't sharing yet). No one knows for sure, because whatever happened was so long ago that it passed out of memory and into legend. "Everyone has their own opinion of where they came from and why they're here," says lead producer Mike Gamble. "Different groups, different sects, different organizations pop up around trying to answer that question."

"There are no colony ships," Darrah says. "There are ruins out in the wilderness that were obviously built by people, in addition to these ancient bits of Shaper technology lying around. But humans have been here long enough that there are ruins built by humans."

Just to get one theory out of the way right off the bat: It's not Earth. "There are humans here, but they are not Earthlings," Warner says. "There are no ties to Earth or another planet. This was the place they originated." Whatever the secret is behind that mystery, one thing is certain: This place is dangerous.

To survive the unforgiving climate and the fierce creatures it breeds (like giant rock titans, for example), some humans train to become Freelancers – individuals who don powered armor called javelins. In terms of mobility and arsenal, think of javelins like Iron Man suits; they even the playing field of this inhospitable world, granting their wearers flight, protection, and the


Each javelin has a basic role. The ranger is a generalist, the colossus is a tank, and the storm is a mage. The interceptor is the fourth javelin, but BioWare is keeping its function secret for now

DRAGON AGE AND MASS EFFECT?

Anthem is currently the only officially announced game from BioWare – a studio that has previously had multiple projects in development at once. Though it continues to support Star Wars: The Old Republic, fans are undoubtedly wondering where things stand for its other popular franchises. "I would say a majority of the people at BioWare are working on Anthem, but we do have people who are figuring out what a next Dragon Age would look like," says BioWare general manager Casey Hudson. And as for Mass Effect? "It's my baby. I helped start Mass Effect from the beginning. Of course we intend to get back to it at some point."

strength to wield incredible firepower. "Humans are not to scale in this world," Warner says. "Getting into that javelin, which gives you a little more height, a little more power, allows you to go out there and actually compete in that."

This is where you come in as a rookie Freelancer. You customize your hero in the character creator at the beginning of the game, then suit up in your newly obtained javelin. "Freelancers, when the game starts, they're kind of going through some tough times," Gamble says. "The order of Freelancers isn't as respected as it should be. They had a huge history – a great past – that isn't really carrying them forward anymore. So you have something to prove."

Beyond that, Anthem's core campaign involves an emerging threat from the northern kingdom. A malevolent and aggressive group of humans called the Dominion is trying to harness the power of Shaper technology. You (and your friends) need to stop them – not because you're the "chosen one," but because they're putting everyone's survival at risk. To make matters worse, another force – non-indigenous invaders called Scars – are also after the technology.

"Part of the mystery of the whole IP is: Where did this stuff come from?" Gamble says. "Where did the Scars come from? Where did that giant titan creature come from?"

All of these different elements in play are typical of BioWare's meticulous brand of world-building, with detailed lore and compelling mysteries. Not only does it set the stage for an interesting campaign, but it also has the potential to branch out in numerous other directions during its post-launch life.

"The conflict is really layered," Warner says. "There's the world conflict, which we'll never solve. The world will always be dangerous. It will always be a place that requires heroes. There's a great story that is set against the Dominion, which are great villains we've been able to populate there. And then there are the other beings who live on the planet … so it's a great palette for us to be able to tell some really cool stories."

SHARED AND PRIVATE SPACES

Some of the stories in Anthem are communal "did you see that?" tales of triumph or failure as you and your fellow Freelancers take on difficult foes. Those stories take place out in the wider world, but their presence doesn't necessarily diminish BioWare's ability to deliver an engaging narrative, cool characters, and consequences based on your choices.

When you think about previous BioWare games, where do your most memorable interactions happen? A few may happen mid-mission, but the majority unfold during the downtime between activities. That's when you have conversations aboard the *Normandy*. That's when you walk around Skyhold. In Anthem, that's when you spend time in Fort Tarsis.

Fort Tarsis is a major human settlement on the planet, and your primary base of operations – where you customize your javelin, equip gear, talk to the inhabitants, and sort through loot. In other shared-world games, this kind of area would be full of other players crowding around quest-givers, dancing, or just standing idle. But Fort Tarsis is not a social hub. In fact, it's the opposite. It's a private refuge.

You won't encounter other players in Fort Tarsis. You have ownership over what happens in this space, which is important because the settlement is one of the primary ways Anthem highlights player choice. "One of the challenges of having a communal, shared world is that it's hard to build consequences into that, because we're all going at different paces," Warner says. "So we can't have a mission where I blow up a fortress out there in the world, because the fortress out there in the world exists for all of us. But when you have a personal story space, I can actually have consequences to the choices I make."

Your decisions in Fort Tarsis can have a variety of major and minor effects, though BioWare doesn't want to spoil the specifics. Based on our time at the studio, we got the sense that these could be as small as a character's shifting opinion of you, or as large as geographical changes. "There are still many twists and turns as part of the critical path of the game, and the sidequests that you do," Gamble says. "Some of it is about world-building. Some of it is about learning about this unfinished world of Anthem. But things happen to characters that they'll never come back from." Whatever paths you take, the results that manifest are unique to your playthrough, forging your connection to the events. In that sense, the tale that unfolds in Fort Tarsis is almost like a traditional single-player narrative, but with cooperative gameplay bridging the gaps.

"When you're in the base, that is your story," Hudson says. "Then you go off and do missions in a world that is dynamic and shared with other players. You're out there doing stuff, and some of the things you choose to do will impact your story, but your story is really a single-player story, and you decide what happens next. If you go and get something in the world as part of a mission and bring it back, you decide which character you're going to give it to. Which relationships you're going to foster. You have your own progress through the story."

From your support crew to quest-giving agents to other denizens, this area is populated by an array of characters for you to interact with, and you build those connections at your own pace in relative safety. But once you leave the confines of Fort Tarsis, you enter the shared world, and the only thing between you and grave injury is an exosuit.

SUITING UP

Though Fort Tarsis provides a narrative foundation for Anthem, the gameplay is all about getting into super-powered exosuits and wreaking havoc across the landscape. You start with a ranger, which is a type of javelin with solid all-around capabilities. During the course of the critical path, you earn three more javelins: the heavily armored colossus, the elementally powered storm, and the interceptor, which BioWare isn't discussing in detail yet (though we know it is considered a light suit like the storm, as opposed to heavy suits like the ranger and colossus).

With their baseline capabilities, the four javelin types essentially function as classes. In addition to their locked-in melee attacks, defensive maneuvers, and ultimate attacks, each suit can equip two weapons, along with two pieces of gear – a category that includes a wide variety of tools like explosives, energy blasts, and more. However, you can't just mix-and-match, since the javelins have access to different arsenals that accentuate their natural abilities. For example, the ranger can use cryo grenades, but only the colossus has the power to wield heavy machine guns. You also have a variety of options within each javelin type, allowing you to alter your loadout to specialize in certain weapons or tactics depending on the task at hand. During our hands-on time, we played a ranger with a cryo grenade modified to send out additional shockwaves from enemies who are killed while frozen. We also played a colossus with a flamethrower, while another colossus in the group used a mortar.

One interesting tidbit about the javelins (and Anthem in general) is that suits represent some of the most cutting-edge technology available. The presence of Shaper artifacts allowed humans to fashion the exosuits, but society's scientific advancement in other areas is not on the same level. In fact, it's almost primitive in some ways. This isn't a space-faring civilization, and javelins aren't just rolling off production lines – which is one of the reasons why they (and Freelancers) are special. "These javelins are handmade suits," Warner says. "There's a craftsman somewhere who has to put this thing together with loving attention to detail. It's not like you can just go down to the Javelin Mart."

Players can enhance this sense of uniqueness through their own modifications. Beyond a javelin's combat capabilities, you also personalize its appearance through paintjobs and other cosmetic additions that can change your javelin's silhouette. BioWare likens it to customizing a car, interacting and tweaking at different layers to ensure that your javelins look cool.

"Each suit is a platform for advancement, progression, customization, and personalization," Warner says. "As you acquire different suits, you're going to be able to shape that into something that reflects your own personal style. If you and I are both in ranger suits, we're going to look different. And because you've equipped different pieces of gear and weaponry, it's going to play a little bit differently."

You can freely switch between your exosuits while in Fort Tarsis or your mobile base – a giant mechanical walker called a strider. That means you aren't locked into one suit, and you don't need to play the whole game multiple times to see what each playstyle has to offer. If you're sick of tanking as a colossus and want to be a glass cannon, you can just hop into your

ANDROMEDA'S STRAIN

Mass Effect Andromeda did not enjoy the same positive reception as previous games in the series. Obviously, BioWare is familiar with the backlash and complaints surrounding Andromeda, so the big question is: What lessons did the company learn from Andromeda's development that it can apply to Anthem? "There are certain specific fidelity things, polish and bugs and stuff like that," says lead producer Mike Gamble, who was also a producer on Andromeda. "Specifically, with the faces, I hope when fans see the stuff we did this year for E3, they'll understand that we're focusing and doubling down on making great, engaging characters.

"But the other thing for me is more focus. Choose the things you're going to do great, and really do the heck out of those. We've been talking about what Anthem is a lot. Anthem is cooperative. Anthem is shared. Anthem is social. Anthem is a private hub, our world. We focus on that set of pillars and execute on them. Instead of going super-wide and trying to do all the things."

The environment isn't just for decoration. Flying under waterfalls cools off your jetpack and buys you more time in the air storm suit and give it a try. "You will never need to restart," Darrah says.

Improving your javelins isn't the only way you get stronger. Your pilot also gains skills that apply universally to any javelin you use. For instance, the booster jets on your javelins overheat with continued use, but by investing in a certain pilot skill, you can increase the amount of time you're able to stay airborne in all of your suits. The goal is to add a satisfying meta-layer of progression; not only are you getting new equipment and modifications that makes your suits better, but you also experience a gradual increase in your capabilities. These skills are major differentiators when comparing early game players to experienced ones, but even novices can contribute when venturing out with a group.

YOUR NEW PARTY

No matter what tweaks you make, no one javelin is ideally equipped to handle every situation. This is why teaming up with other Freelancers in different exosuits is an important part of the equation; it gives you the chance to use complementary abilities and tear through the opposition with maximum efficiency. "The encounters are set up for four players," says lead producer Ben Irving. "That's where the fun is, and they're built with that teamwork in mind."

The javelins are designed to work together, creating opportunities for each other to shine. The storm can use elemental abilities to damage enemies or expose vulnerabilities. If a group of Scars are standing in the water, a lightning blast from the storm can shock them, doing damage and creating some clear shots for the ranger. A colossus may walk into the range of a mine, but with a raised shield to deflect damage and protect the party.

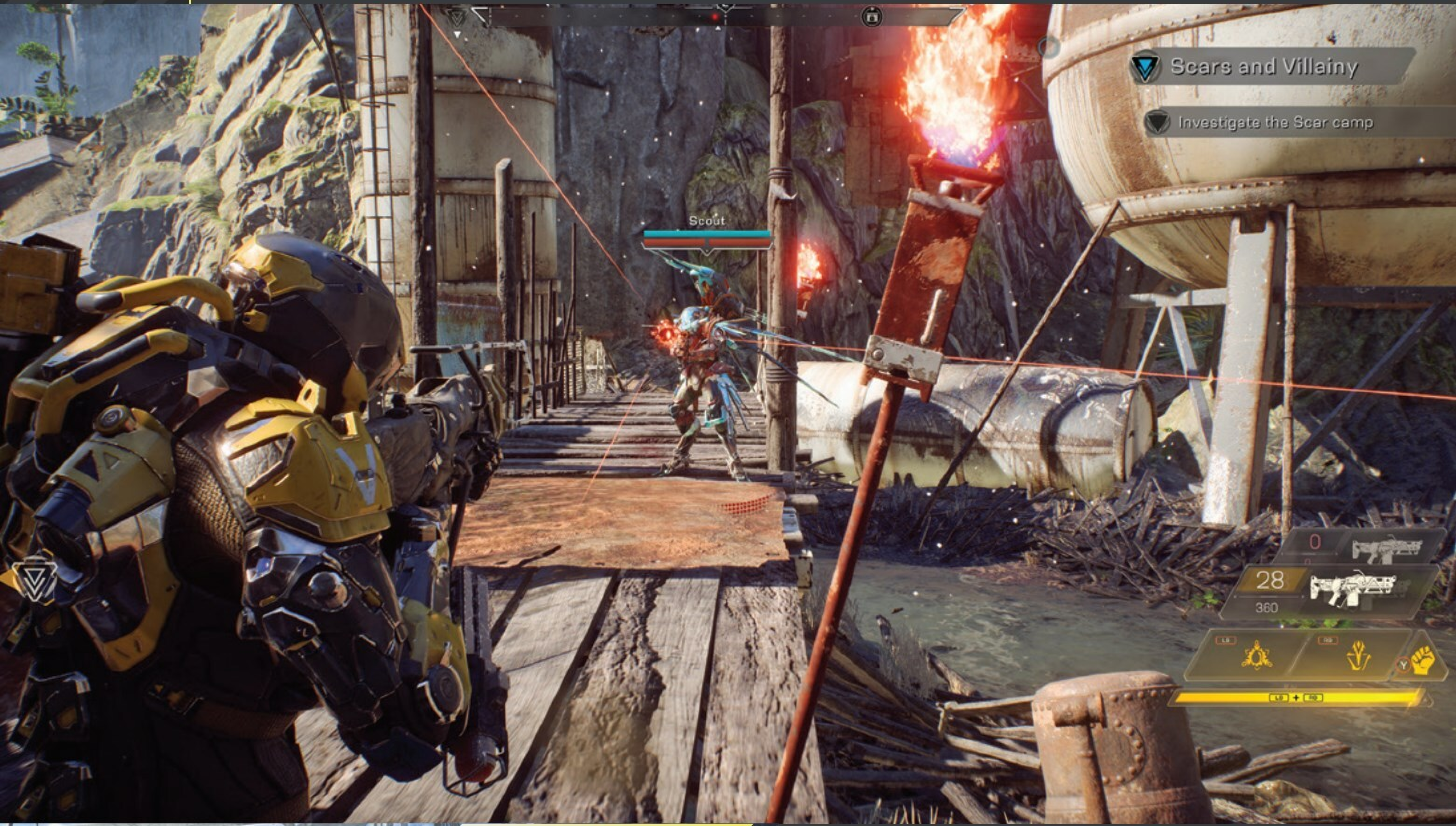
When certain abilities interact, you might get additional bonuses. These combos don't seem to be as rigidly defined by the primer/detonator distinction we saw in the Mass Effect series. However, they still appear rooted in the idea of using certain abilities to expose enemies, and another to capitalize on that weakness. "The combination system is built toward this idea of different heroes coming together with different suits," Warner says. "But even yourself, you're able to pull off some combos. If you've frozen something, and then you detonate that with a missile or a melee strike, you're going to get some cool combo bonuses."

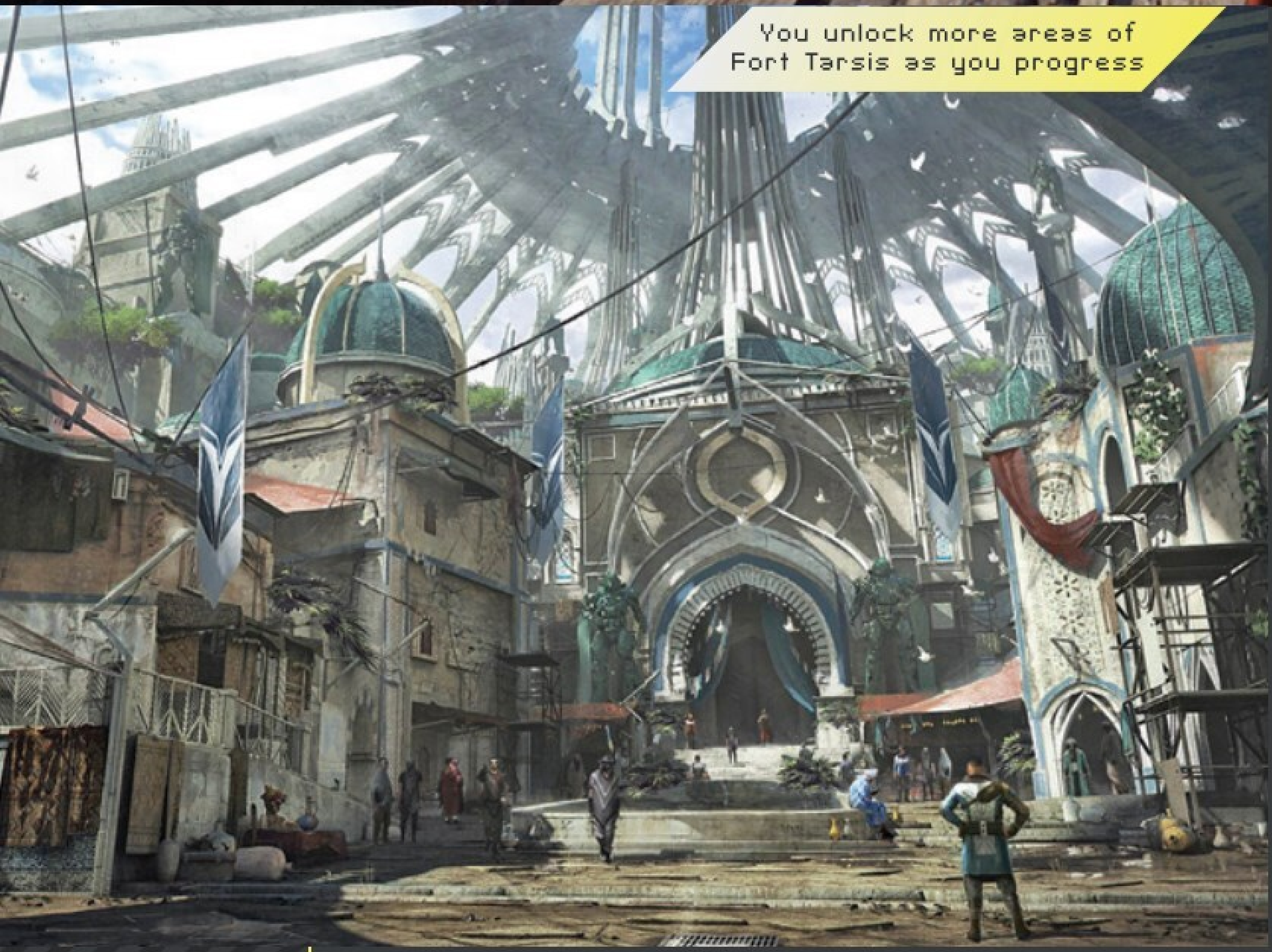
Technically speaking, you can play through Anthem's story missions solo – but you probably shouldn't. "For the critical path … if you do want to play by yourself, you can," Gamble says. "We're not limiting that artificially. But the game itself is built for you and a bunch of friends – because your friends are your companions in this case. That's the whole point."

Even though you meet a variety of NPCs in Fort Tarsis and have a crew aboard your strider, your actual party is composed of other human players. That's unusual for a BioWare game, but it is also the main way Anthem opens a new, unscripted vein of storytelling for the studio. You won't be comparing notes with your friends about how you handled different quests in the shared world, because your friends will be on those quests with you. Instead of a hearing compliments that A.I. characters are programmed to say, you will get genuine reactions. All of your greatest victories – and most humiliating defeats – are shared with other players by your side.

BioWare isn't pretending that moments like these are brand new; they've been the primary draw of multiplayer gaming for many years. However, gamers haven't experienced these things in a setting like this before, or with something like javelins at their disposal. "What if I could live in a BioWare world that didn't have to end after 60 hours?" Warner says. "Sharing that with friends is always something we thought would be a cool thing to be able to do. So, hopefully, people who love our other experiences will jump into this with an eye toward that."

STORM




You unlock more areas of Fort Tarsis as you progress

FIGHTING THE CHAOS

So what will you and your friends be doing in Anthem? One of the key aspects of the world is its unpredictability, which results in new events taking place all the time. Maybe certain Shaper technology has switched on, and you need to shut it off. Or maybe a terrifying creature has spawned that you can take down. Beyond those dynamic challenges, BioWare has a wide variety of other activities in the works, each one catering to different levels of commitment and difficulty.

The most general is free play, which has you out in the sprawling world with no specific objectives to chase. We saw some free play in action, in which a lone colossus was cruising between zones, collecting crafting materials, and taking out pockets of Scars. The game also generates minor tasks to complete; we saw a downed freelancer who needed help, and a member of the Sentinels (an organization that protects Fort Tarsis) to rescue. But one of the biggest thrills was the simple act of exploring, since the freedom of flight gives you a unique perspective on your beautiful and strange surroundings. The world is large and seamless (with no loading between zones), with different area types to explore. "We conceived the world as different ecosystems," Warner says. "Each ecosystem has its own band of creatures that are native to it. So as you traverse the map, you're going to encounter different types of creatures."

You still earn rewards and loot in free play, but it seems tailor-made for killing time, like when you're waiting for a friend to finish outfitting their javelin in their version of Fort Tarsis. If you want more directed play, you can tackle formal missions. These might be part of the critical path, or quests given to you by other characters in the world.

"We have NPC quest-givers in Tarsis," Gamble says. "They're called agents, and those agents give you missions. The type of mission an agent will give you is based on a certain type of context. Some will give you context on the Scars, some will give you context on the Sentinels … Characters that you have relationships with, they will also, as you get to know them, give you more quests related to them."

On the higher end of the challenge spectrum are strongholds, which is a general term for instanced areas that require more teamwork and coordination than typical missions. Other games use terminology like "dungeon" or "raid" for this type of content, but they all rely on a similar concept. They put you to the test using diverse encounters and huge bosses that encourage your party to assume specific roles and experiment with different tactics.

Though you encounter some strongholds as part of the critical path, they also represent one of the ways Anthem continues to entice and challenge players in the elder game, after completion of the main story. By tackling harder versions of the strongholds, you can reap even greater rewards. But if you're

Anthem's world has a day/night cycle, as well as various weather conditions

not a hardcore player, that doesn't mean you won't get the coolest loot. "One of the things we've noted is that we want everybody to be able to participate in what we feel is the best or most challenging content that we have to offer," Warner says. "We don't want there to be that arbitrary bar: Unless you're this good, you can't play this."

Gamble adds: "Everyone has their own, let's call it 'path to victory.'"

Ultimately, the variety of content is meant to provide options for how players engage with Anthem. Some quests can be completed quickly, some take more time. Some content can be done solo, but most is designed for a group. That last point may alarm fans who see BioWare as one of the last bastions for quality single-player games, but the company is taking deliberate steps to ease players into the cooperative structure.

CO-OP CONVENIENCES

One reason people like single-player games is the lack of external obligation. You alone control how, when, and for how long you play. Cooperative experiences add new layers of coordination to deal with, from scheduling to matchmaking to social interaction. These certainly aren't difficult barriers (especially for people who enjoy multiplayer), but they can be a hassle for those who just want to enjoy a virtual world.

"We've played a lot of different multiplayer games, and sometimes it can be a little bit awkward," Warner says. "You have a slot open, somebody jumps in, and you're like, 'Ooh, I didn't really want to play with you. But you're my friend, so I'll play with you for a little while, and then I'll make an excuse, and then I'll log out and log back in with my status set to offline.' There's always a little bit of social friction involved in multiplayer matchmaking, at least in my experience."

The team wants every aspect of Anthem's co-op to be as seamless as possible, and the game has several features built to alleviate common multiplayer hassles. If you're in Fort Tarsis and want to team up for a mission, you just open your map. That shows you the world and the available activities, along with who is currently undertaking them (weighted toward people on your friends list). If there's an open slot, you just jump right into action.

"Our map system is kind of a LFG [looking for group] lobby and the world map from an RPG blended together," Darrah says. "You see these opportunities on the map, blended in with your own experience. That is very much what we're trying for – something that is a little bit less rigid and gamey and more fluid."

Alternately, you can start your own mission, and that will show up on their maps as an available activity to join. You can also invite people specifically, or rely on the in-game notification system to alert your friends that you've started a task. You can tweak the settings to dictate whether your game is public or private – and if it's public, you can rest assured that plenty of missions are clear and intuitive enough that you can complete them without voice chat.

MICROTRANSACTIONS

BioWare already has a firm stance in its approach to microtransactions. "We have a couple pillars that we stick to, and generosity to our players is number one on that list," says game director Jon Warner. "Making sure you feel you got a great value for what you bought, and that you get everything you think you should get for that money. And then, as we continue to service this game and create more stuff for it, allow you the opportunity to buy cosmetic items and vanity items that you're interested in. But no loot crates. No pay-to-win. Strictly cosmetic."

"Forever?" we ask.

"Forever," Warner says.

Because Anthem has a shared world and private hub, the structure of the game naturally splits groups apart. “I jump in and I’m able to do a mission with somebody, and that’s an experience that lasts maybe 20 minutes,” Warner says. “And then the system breaks us apart; I don’t have to say ‘I don’t want to play with you anymore.’ It just does. It breaks us apart and we each go back to our own Fort Tarsis.” Of course, if you and your friends just want to stick together and play for hours on end, you can do that without constantly disbanding and reforming the group.

Another issue with co-op gaming is how to address a power disparity between players. When low-level and high-level players team up, sometimes that means the weaker one is staying back just trying to not take damage, while the stronger one does all of the heavy lifting. That isn’t how Anthem works; regardless of power level, any players can team up and start fighting. “It’ll feel like it’s the same amount of damage,” Irving says. “The difference will be, if I have a greater variety of gear at my disposal, I’m going to be more efficient because I have more things to use than you. But the idea is that it will feel good – it will feel like we’re both contributing.” Even if high-level players are doing a mission that takes place late in the critical path, low-level players still have the option to join – if they confirm that they don’t mind spoilers.

These features all feed into a clear purpose for Anthem’s multiplayer: Players should be able to find companions with minimal hassle, embark on adventures, and transition easily from the private space of Fort Tarsis to the wider shared world. “The edges of your experience should be fuzzier,” Darrah says. “You are experiencing the multiplayer opportunities from your story and other people’s stories much more seamlessly, much more integrated together.”

THE PILOT’S LIFE

During our time at BioWare’s Edmonton studio, we sat down to play Anthem for about 45 minutes, mainly going through the same mission EA recently demoed during its pre-E3 showcase. Our time revolved around using ranger and colossus javelins; we had about 10 seconds of time playing the storm before BioWare team members noticed something amiss and switched us to an approved exosuit – but that brief taste of the storm’s mystical energy has us excited to dive deeper in the future.

Before the mission officially starts, we see a cutscene set aboard your strider involving the three members of your crew. We’d seen this cinematic earlier, so as the characters talk, BioWare gives us a little background on each of them. Haluk is the mechanic who keeps your strider operational, but he also has a long history with the player character. Owen is a cypher – a term for someone who provides information and support to Freelancers in the field. He’s happy to help in this role, but Owen

also wants to get in his own javelin and help out. Lastly, there's Faye, who has a personal connection to one of the main threads from the critical path – but that's all BioWare is saying about her for now.

After the scene ends, we are finally able to control our javelins. I am in a ranger, equipped with powerful late-game gear, like an assault rifle that fires an area-of-effect round every 10 shots, and an arm-mounted energy blast that looks like a move straight from Iron Man's repertoire. But the real fun starts when I activate my jetpack.

If you're one of the cynics wondering what sets Anthem apart, this is a major factor. The jetpack combines freedom of movement and exhilarating speed. Plus, the verticality of the world encourages you to make use of your mobility. In terms of exploration, that means navigating interesting spaces, or trying to pull stunts like flying between a titan's legs. In terms of combat, it opens up a new dimension by allowing you to fly to better positions on the battlefield, retreat into the air, circle your foes, or hover while launching a salvo of missiles. I get a sample of all of these situations as our group fights some Scars on our way to investigate the source of a mysterious toxin.

We find the Shaper machine dispersing the toxin, but we need to collect some items called "echoes of the Anthem" in the area to shut the device down. This involves fighting more Scars, and during the encounter, a colossus in the group fires off its ultimate attack, which is essentially a nuclear warhead. To mop up the survivors, I experiment with my melee attacks, but they aren't as satisfying or effective as shooting energy blasts from a distance. However, the two gear slots (which includes my energy blast) are governed by cooldowns, so I can't just use it endlessly.

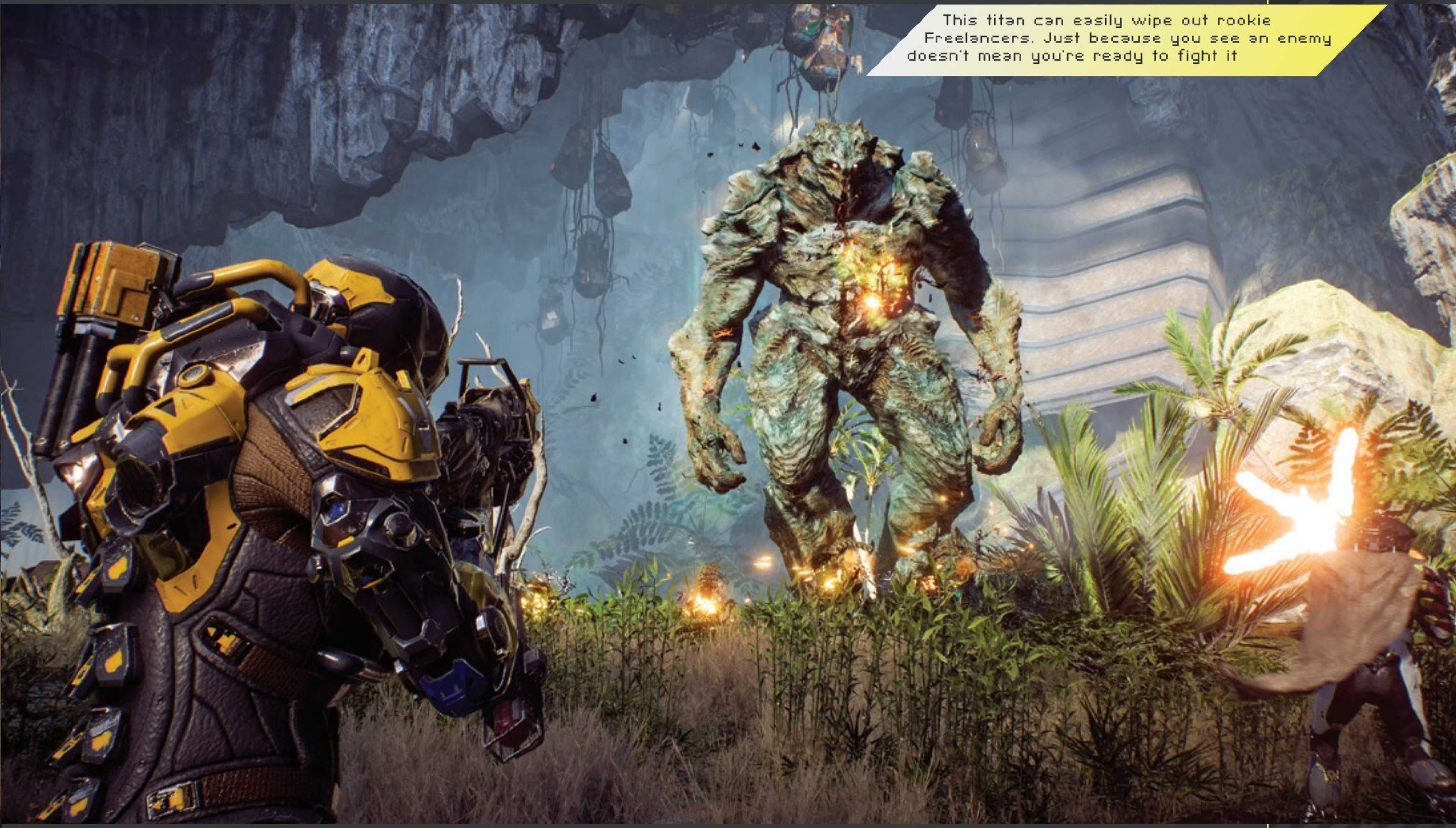
With the Shaper technology shut down, we move to investigate the source of the toxin – a search that sends us underwater to a cave. Though javelins can function and maneuver while submerged, they can't use their weapons. In other words, don't expect underwater combat encounters. Once we reach the cave, we fly out of the water and work through a network of rooms. The storm uses an electrical attack to shock a bunch of Scars standing in the water, and a colossus uses its shield to keep everyone safe from a series of landmines.

We eventually arrive in large cavernous area with a nasty surprise waiting in the center: a swarm tyrant. This spider-like beast is the boss of the mission. It has armored plating, shoots webbing, and can scurry up walls. Also, like many creatures you can encounter in Anthem, it's a titanic foe that dwarfs the ragtag group of Freelancers. But the ensuing fight demonstrates the various powers of the javelins, and highlights the ways your team can work together.

As one colossus drew the creature's attention, I focused fire on its armored plating to expose weak spots. When I got hit with a web attack that kept me from moving, one of my teammates used the colossus' flamethrower to burn away the webbing. When all of us focused fire on a vulnerable sac, it sent the swarm tyrant into a downed state that allowed me to unload with my ultimate – an array of homing missiles. When the boss retreats momentarily, a swarm of smaller spiders come creeping at us from other parts of the cavern, keeping us occupied until the big one returns.

After a few minutes of fighting, the beast still has plenty of health. This isn't going to be an easy encounter… but we won't see the end of it today. A "Thank you for playing" screen pops up, marking the end of what BioWare plans to show us for now.

After putting down the controller, I couldn't wait to play more. Yes, it is still in an early state, but it clearly has the potential to be something special. The flying suits make you feel like a superhero, giving you command of the air while also letting you use ridiculous firepower. For fans of BioWare games, the biggest mistake would be writing off Anthem because it doesn't fall squarely in the traditional RPG space; currently, its layers appear to go beyond easy genre labels. But if you like character progression, cool weapons, and exploring persistent worlds, Anthem could easily to draw you in and keep you invested.



This titan can easily wipe out rookie Freelancers. Just because you see an enemy doesn't mean you're ready to fight it

THE CHASE

If the goal is to create a world that doesn't need to end, then players need compelling reasons to keep returning to the game. After you finish the critical path and level up your pilot, you need to chase new goals and bigger rewards. With so much time left before Anthem's February 22 release date, BioWare isn't talking too much about the specifics of this elder-game content, but the team did outline the philosophy behind what should keep players hooked.

"At that point, rather than closing down, it's really about opening it up and giving you the opportunity to become a Freelancer," Darrah says. "It's almost like it's the beginning of the adventure as opposed to the end. There's a moment of closure, but then there's so much more to do."

The most obvious incentive is loot. A familiar coded progression of green, blue, purple, and orange gear keeps you on the hunt to optimize your abilities, damage output, and cosmetic elements. "We want to make sure we are rewarding players who are skilled and take on big challenges," Warner says. "And rewarding them appropriately so they can peacock and say, 'Hey, look, I got this because I'm a badass.' That's important."

Another persistent element is something called the alliance system, though BioWare isn't saying much on what that is or how it works. "I think it suffices to say that this is a very social experience that we're looking to build," Warner says. "Being with your friends, playing with your friends. We want to reward you for doing those things in lots of different ways."

The lore and history of Anthem's world allows it to undergo drastic changes, and as a live service, that opens the door for unique and exciting events the whole community can experience. In some cases, this could mean taking familiar content and altering the context around it, like a Shaper artifact turning on in an area that creates new environmental hazards. In other cases, this could result in completely new content. Though the team doesn't give an exact timeframe or structure for this kind of growth, we know that BioWare is hoping to issue modest updates regularly – not wait seven months to drop massive additions all at once.

Once players get their hands on Anthem, they are undoubtedly going to have their own opinions about how the game can improve. Listening and responding to community feedback is an integral part of supporting a live game, and that can lead to a rapid shifting of priorities. Rebalancing weapons, adjusting inventory space, adding a wider variety of quests – when dealing a game like this, it's impossible to predict which issues will surface after release. "You have to build staffing plans that allow you to be flexible," Gamble says. "You have to build systems

Because of the potential to break the game's core loop, BioWare currently has no plans to allow players to trade items

LOVELESS

BioWare fans enjoy discussing their favorite characters, and the cast of Anthem appears to add some new contenders to the mix. You form bonds with them over the duration of the game, and grow attached as you learn more about them. However, if you're hoping to pursue a romantic relationship, you're looking for love in the wrong place. "There are no romances," says lead producer Mike Gamble. "There are friendships. Some of the stuff we did with Mass Effect – the Citadel DLC specifically – there was a lot of friendship moments. You and Garrus sitting up, shooting – that kind of stuff, we want to lean into that. The romantic stuff, we're moving away from that for Anthem."

which allow you to show content in different ways. We're already thinking about the post-launch world of Anthem, and we've put rough plans in place. We have certain delivery stuff that we have to do, but that could change. We have the team and the flexibility to be able to do that."

A NEW MISSION

After starting work on the IP that would become Anthem, Casey Hudson left BioWare in 2014. When he returned in 2017 as general manager, one of the first things he wanted to do was figure out what keeps fans coming back to BioWare games. This resulted in a new mission statement for the studio, which reads: "We create worlds of adventure, conflict, and companionship that inspire you to become the hero of your story."

This compact, clear identity encompasses classics like Baldur's Gate, Knights of the Old Republic, Jade Empire, Mass Effect, and Dragon Age. But it also serves as a guide for future projects. Though Anthem conforms to the studio's mission statement, it is something new for BioWare. At the same time, it isn't wholly unfamiliar. "Thinking about what it would mean to bring that BioWare experience to a shared open world is something that really drove us," Warner says. "Creating a world where you want to be, that has internal consistency, and that you can just travel around in without loading into different areas. A living, breathing world that is populated by people you want to get to know and develop a relationship with. Those are the things that were really driving us as we were thinking about Anthem."

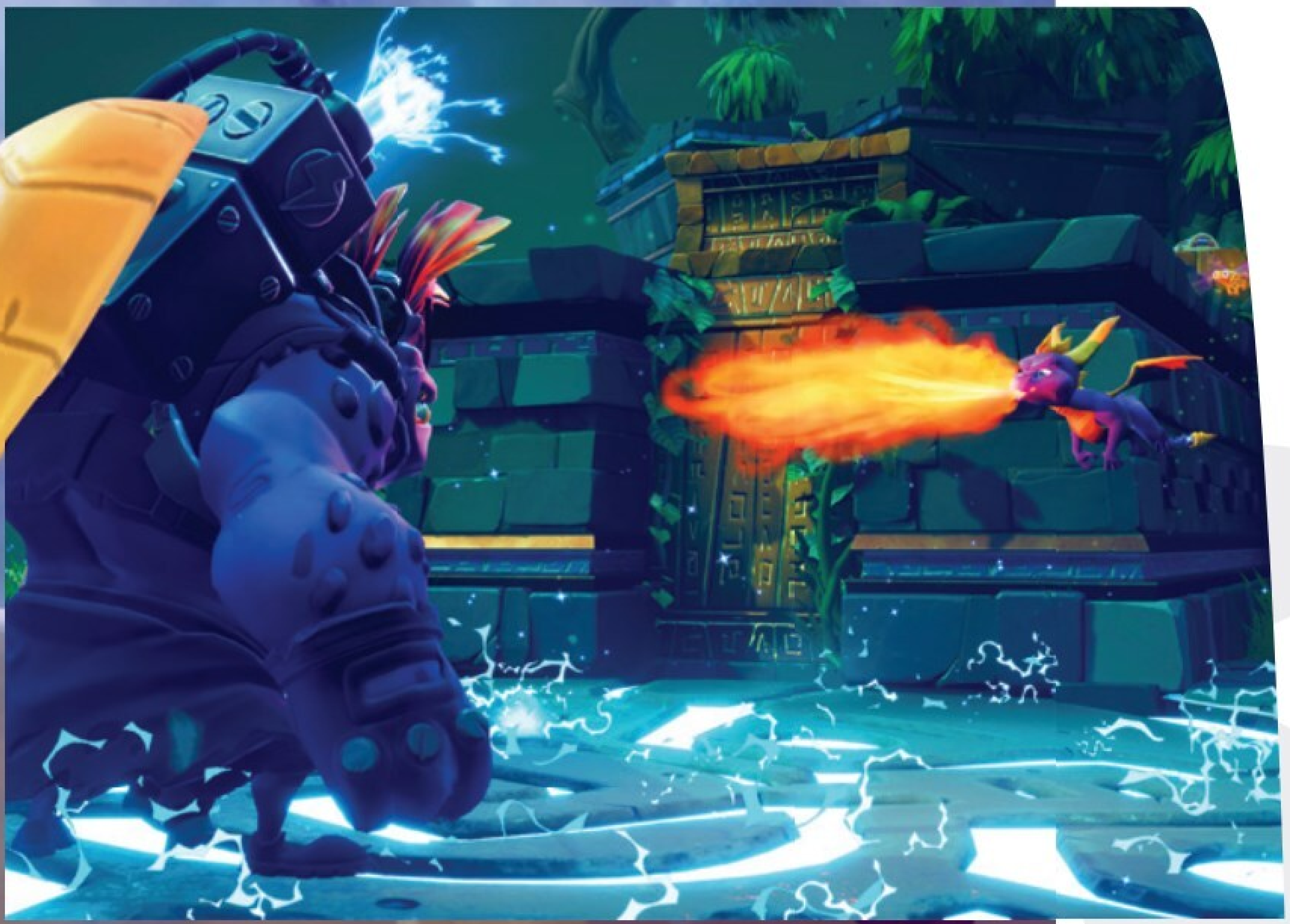
Javelins are exciting, cooperative battles are fun, and the immense world provides an opportunity to tell endless stories. That's the heart of Anthem. It has elements in common with other shared-world shooters and other BioWare games, but also has its own innovations and surprises that make it unique. "As you look back to what we've done over the last more than 20 years, there's actually been change all the way along," Darrah says. "Moving from 2D to 3D, adding multiplayer, moving to an online live service. It's been a story of evolution. Anthem is just continuing on that journey." ◆

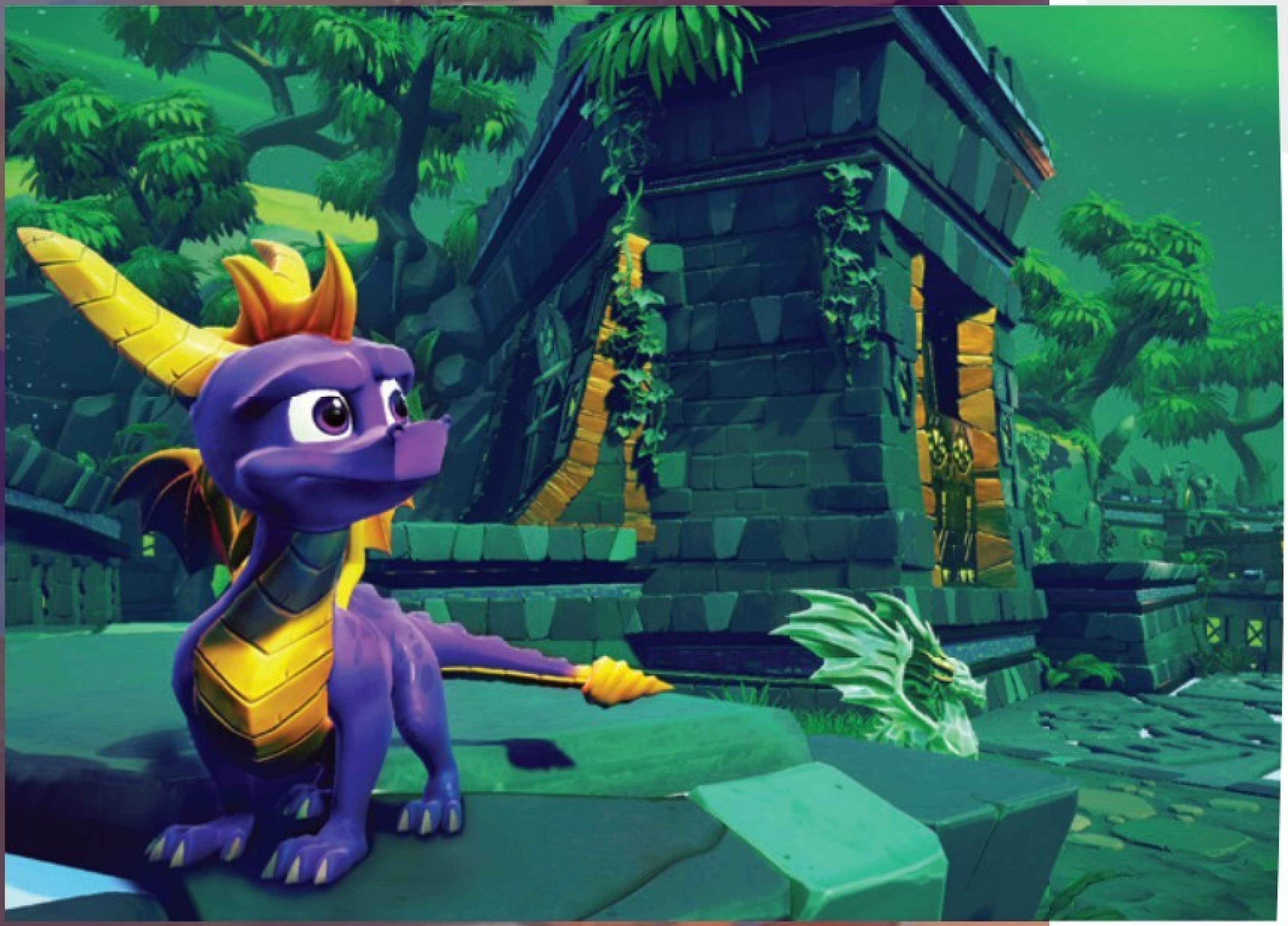
Visit www.gameinformer.com/anthem for more information about Anthem, including exclusive interviews and insight from the team at BioWare

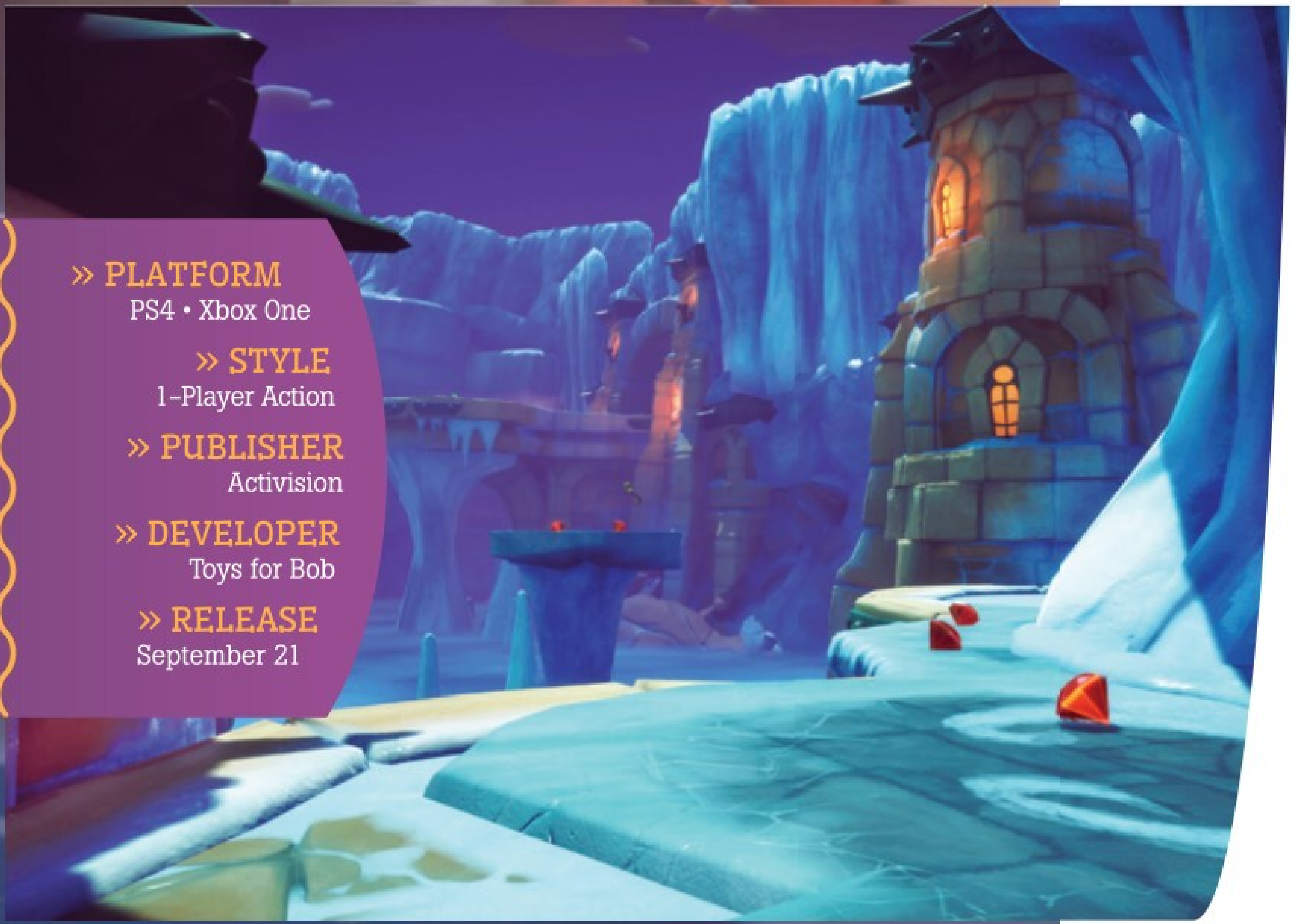
HOW TO RETRAIN YOUR DRAGON

The purple dragon's classic adventures are new again in **Spyro Reignited Trilogy**

by Andrew Reiner







» **PLATFORM**
PS4 • Xbox One

» **STYLE**
1-Player Action

» **PUBLISHER**
Activision

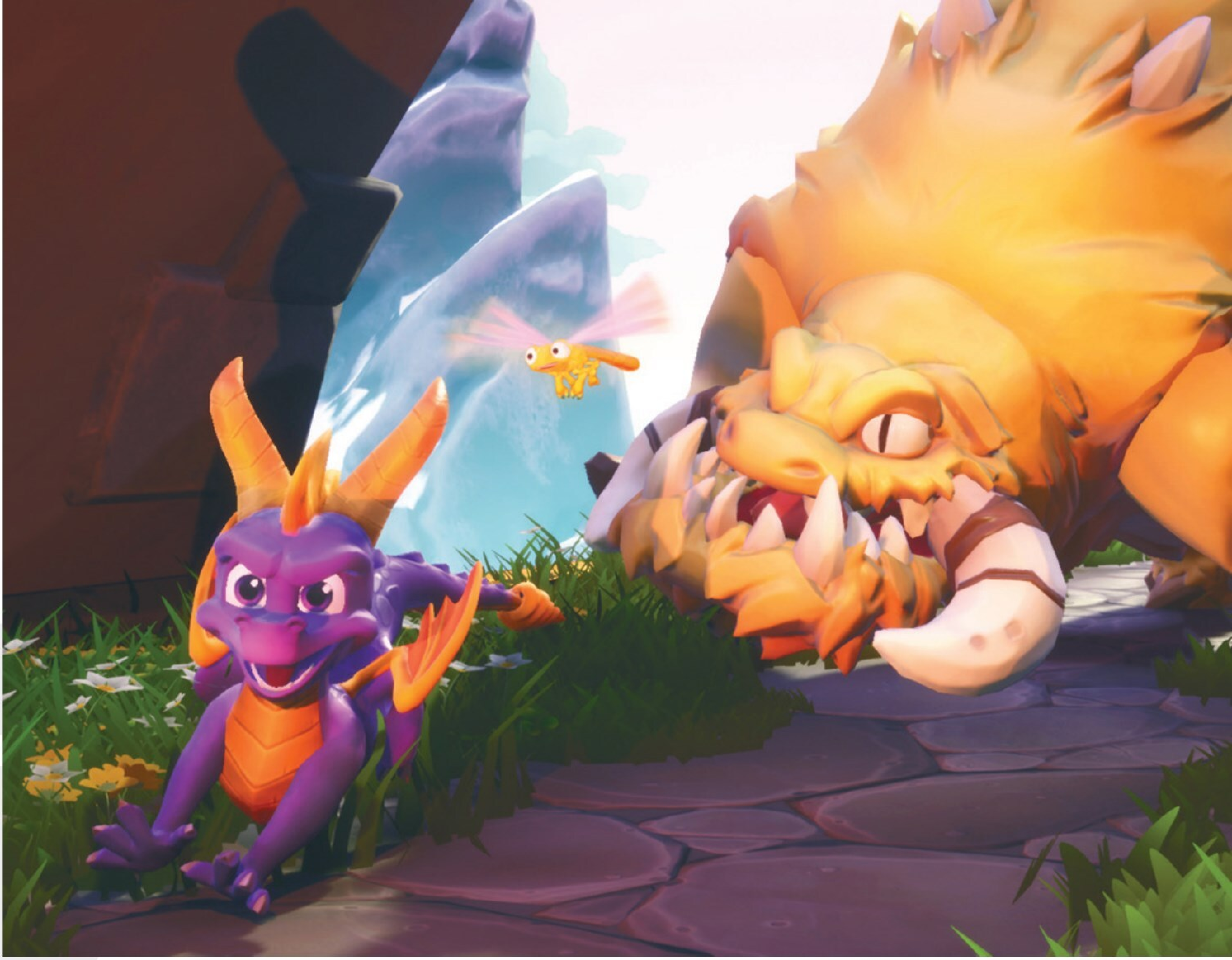
» **DEVELOPER**
Toys for Bob

» **RELEASE**
September 21

Part of Activision's business mimics archaeology – digging through decades of gaming history left behind by other development studios with the hope of reshaping their work for a new generation to enjoy. Last year we watched Activision subsidiary Vicarious Visions dig up Crash Bandicoot's first adventures, which date back over 20 years to the original PlayStation.

In creating the Crash Bandicoot: N. Sane Trilogy, Vicarious was tasked with what may sound like a fool's errand: preserve the nostalgia so fans would feel like they were revisiting their favorite games, but also make it look state-of-the-art so the next generation of gamers thought it was new and exciting. To accomplish this feat, not one line of code from the original games was used. Vicarious rebuilt those titles from the ground up, replicating the design right down to the exact placement of specific items. Crash's movement speed was also unaltered. The one significant alteration was enhancing the visuals. Vicarious made it look as beautiful as any big-budget PlayStation 4 game out there.

Crash Bandicoot: N. Sane Trilogy was a critical and commercial success, leading many to believe Activision would explore Spyro the Dragon's history next. Activision made this decision well before the launch of N. Sane Trilogy, enlisting developer Toys for Bob to resurrect Insomniac Games' original three Spyro games for the PlayStation. Fans now get to experience Spyro the Dragon, Spyro 2: Ripto's Rage, and Spyro: Year of the Dragon through the Spyro Reignited Trilogy. Toys for Bob is no stranger to Spyro – this beloved dragon was a key player in this studio's wildly successful Skylanders games.



Toys for Bob's mission to retain the nostalgia of a series but enhance it visually proved to be a little more challenging than Vicarious Visions', as the visual fidelity of the original Spyro games didn't hold up as well as Crash's. The narrow play space of the Crash titles allowed for more detail to be included in the environments, whereas Spyro's worlds were more open and less defined. Toys for Bob's artists did their best to try to get into the mind of Insomniac's artists to figure out their grand vision. Some of the stages teased the idea of ancient civilizations and magical places but ended up consisting of just two huts and a streak of magical light in the distance. Without adding any other geometry that would change the play space, Toys for Bob's design team expanded on this vision as much as possible. The environment still consists of just two huts, but they look entirely different, and are now intricately detailed to convey the sense of society and magic. It looks like a new game, but fans will find it oddly familiar.

Josh Nadelberg, art director at Toys for Bob, says there's a tricky balance to this process. "We tried to evoke the memory you had," he says. "Memories are always seen through rosy glasses. I had this experience showing my kids the original The Legend of Zelda. I told them, 'You're going to love this game. It's so cool!' They looked at it and didn't see what I saw. It totally wasn't what I remember. We're trying to stay true to the original intent, but 20 years have passed, and when you go back and see what those games look like, you have a nostalgic idea in your mind, but it isn't what you expect."

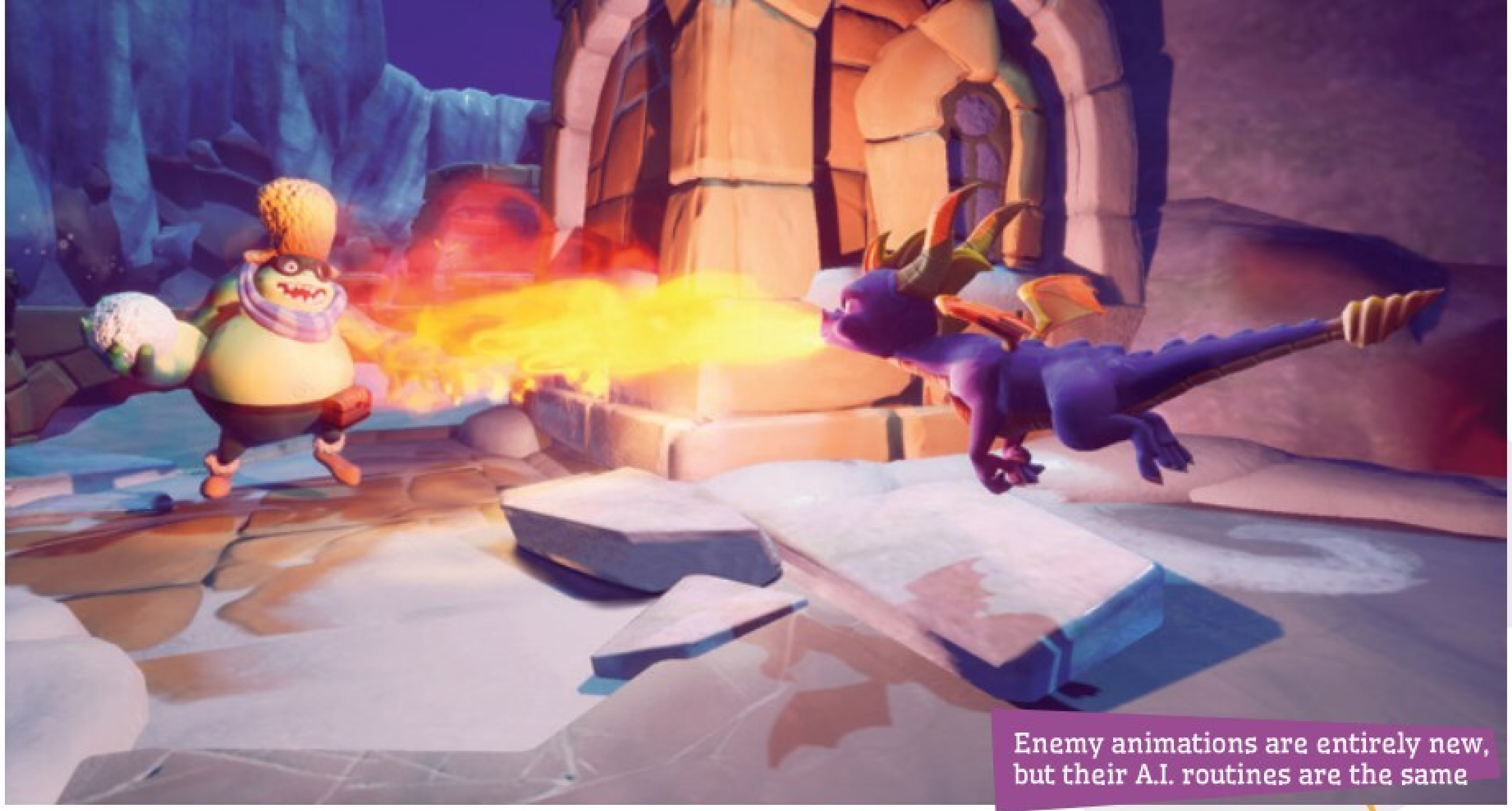
Toys for Bob showed me two stages from Spyro the Dragon, both set in the introductory Artisans Homeworld. Even in the original games, this realm delivered a strong European and Tuscan vibe, but I now find myself focusing more on the foliage than the architecture in the distance. The stage of note is called Toasty. Spyro is in ankle-high grass that flows with the wind and cinders when his fire breath scorches it. Even the grass completely changes the look of the game. In the original title, Spyro just stood on a flat green slab. I notice a series of sparkling gems sitting along a brick wall are slightly hidden in the grass, and are also in shade – another new element as the games didn't have any form of lighting and instead relied on vertex coloring to simulate it.

Toys for Bob rebuilt all of the games from scratch in Unreal Engine 4, and developed tools to extract as much data from Insomniac's games as possible. "It wasn't the actual source assets, however," says Peter Kavic, senior producer at Toys for Bob. "The tool allowed us to map out the precious placement of objects in the world, and lines things traveled on. We have all of that accurately captured and recreated here." Insomniac was able to rely on the exact level meshes, and used them for paint overs for the artists. They also used the original collision meshes to deliver what is essentially the exact same experience, but with a fresh coat of paint.

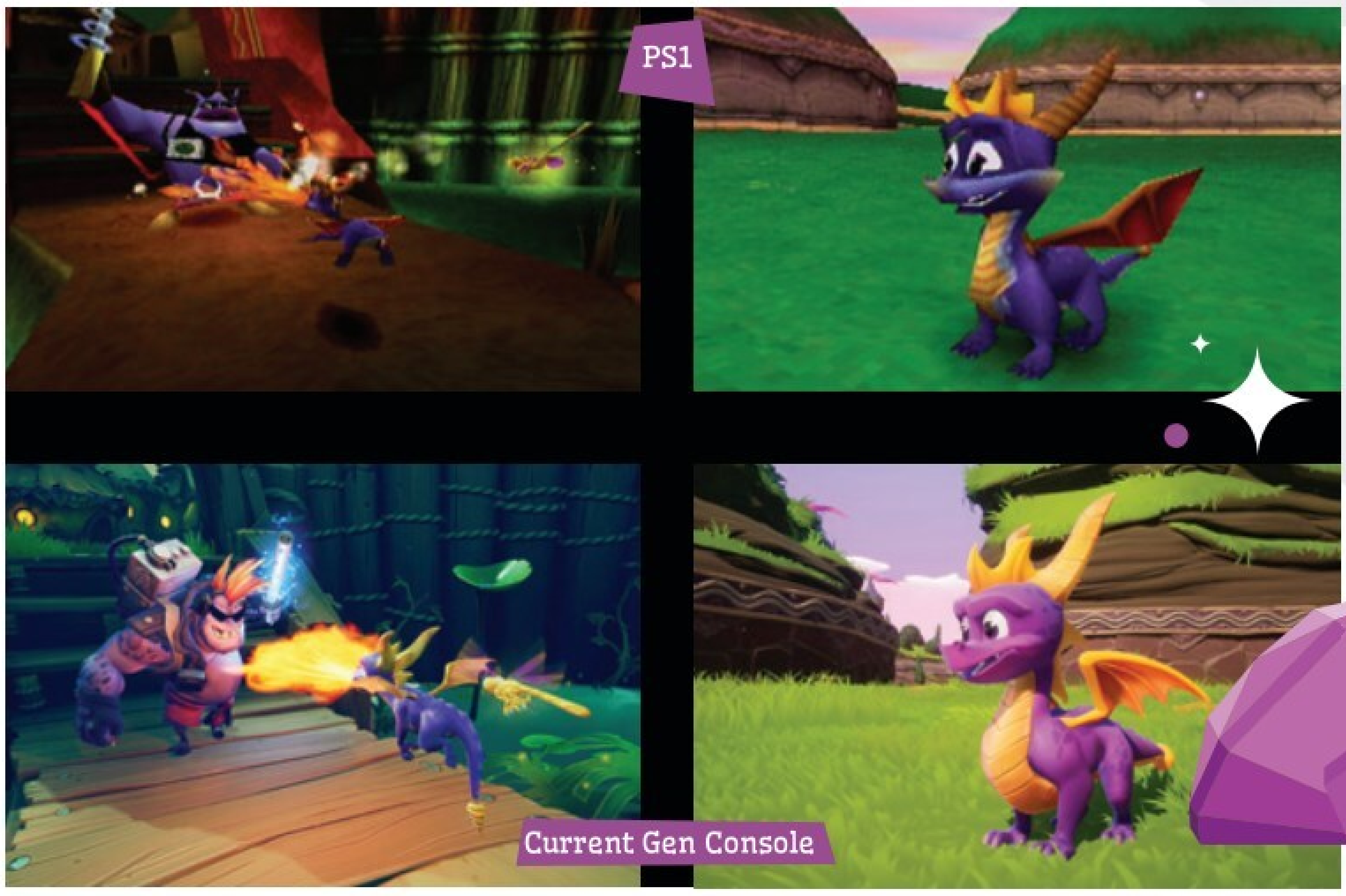
"The original game is basically running under a bunch of layers," Kavic explains.

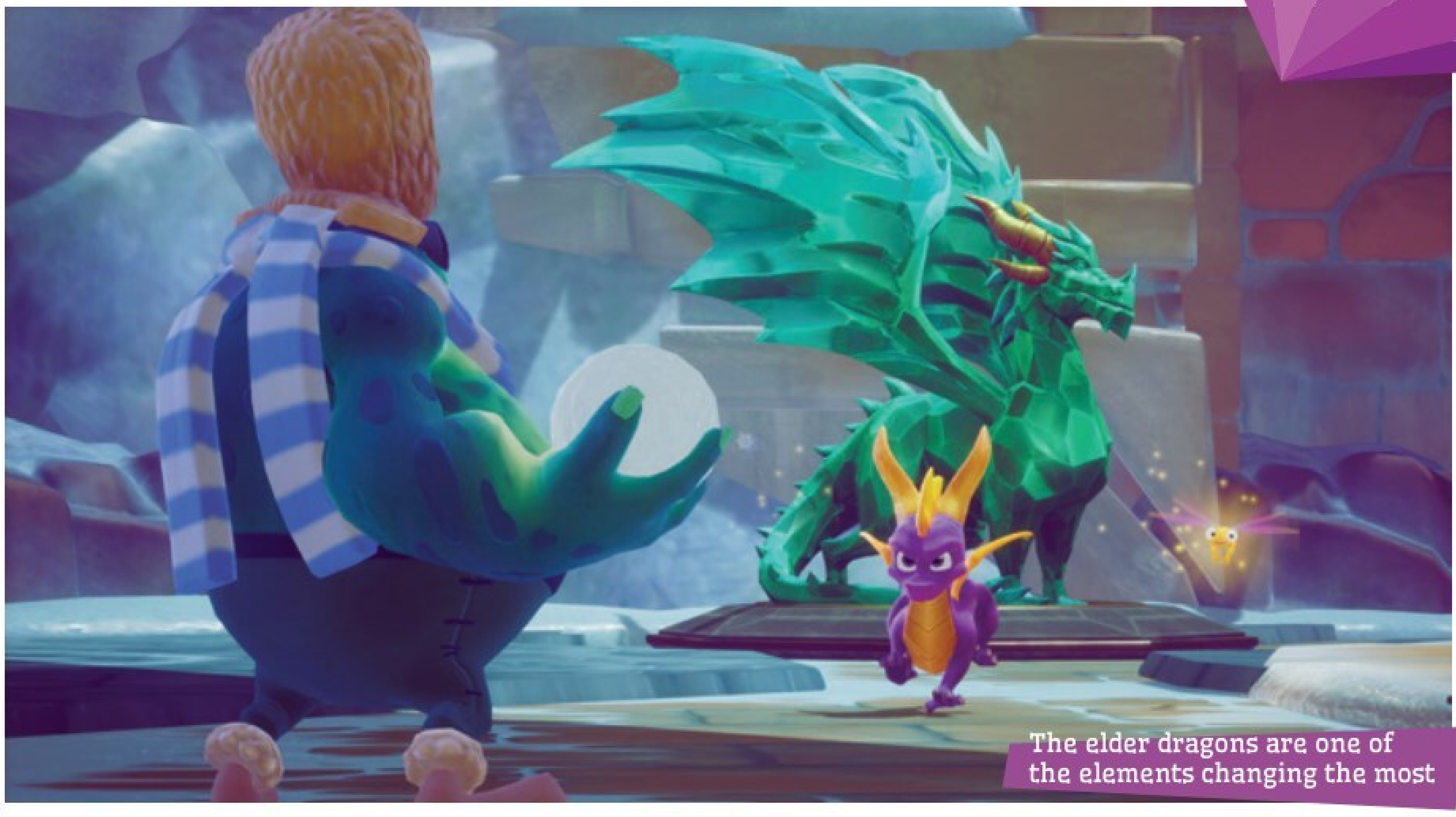
The enemies that prowl these stunningly detailed environments offer the same behaviors and basic designs as before, but are now filled with life. We come across a scruffy white dog, but don't engage it. We instead sit back to see what it will do. The dog sniffs around, yawns, and curls up to take a nap. As we approach, he opens one eye to see if he heard something. We freeze in our tracks, and he falls back asleep. His ears perk up with our next step and he leaps to action, barking incessantly. A blast of fire breath burns his hair off, revealing a hilariously skinny pup underneath.

The wizard, who is with the dog, starts an assault but again isn't a match for fire. His physical being goes up in smoke, and his hat floats comically onto his cloak. Spyro looks exactly the same, but the lighting in the environment



Enemy animations are entirely new, but their A.I. routines are the same





The elder dragons are one of the elements changing the most

often makes him look different in color. He is still gold and purple, but his shiny scales are pulling in the shades of pink from the artisan sky.

The gate the wizard was protecting leads to a hallway filled with paintings of dragons and vistas. This is a nice touch that showcases the skills of the dragons that once roamed these lands. As the plot details, Spyro is the only dragon left in this world, a result of a magical spell cast by Gnasty Gnorc that trapped all of the elder dragons in crystal shards. Spyro must free all of them, and take down Gnorc's forces in the process.

The one big change fans of the PlayStation games will see is every elder dragon has been redesigned. We had a chance to see one, which Spyro frees after exiting the art gallery. Toys for Bob wants each dragon to hammer home the theme of the world they inhabit. This particular one holds a paint tray, wears a stylish cap, and sports a tiny moustache. None of the dragons are just palette swaps.

As Spyro converses with the beast, we notice his voice has changed. In this first game he was originally voiced by Carlos Alazraqui, but then was replaced by Tom Kenny (best known as SpongeBob SquarePants) for the next two games. Kenny now voices Spyro in all three titles.

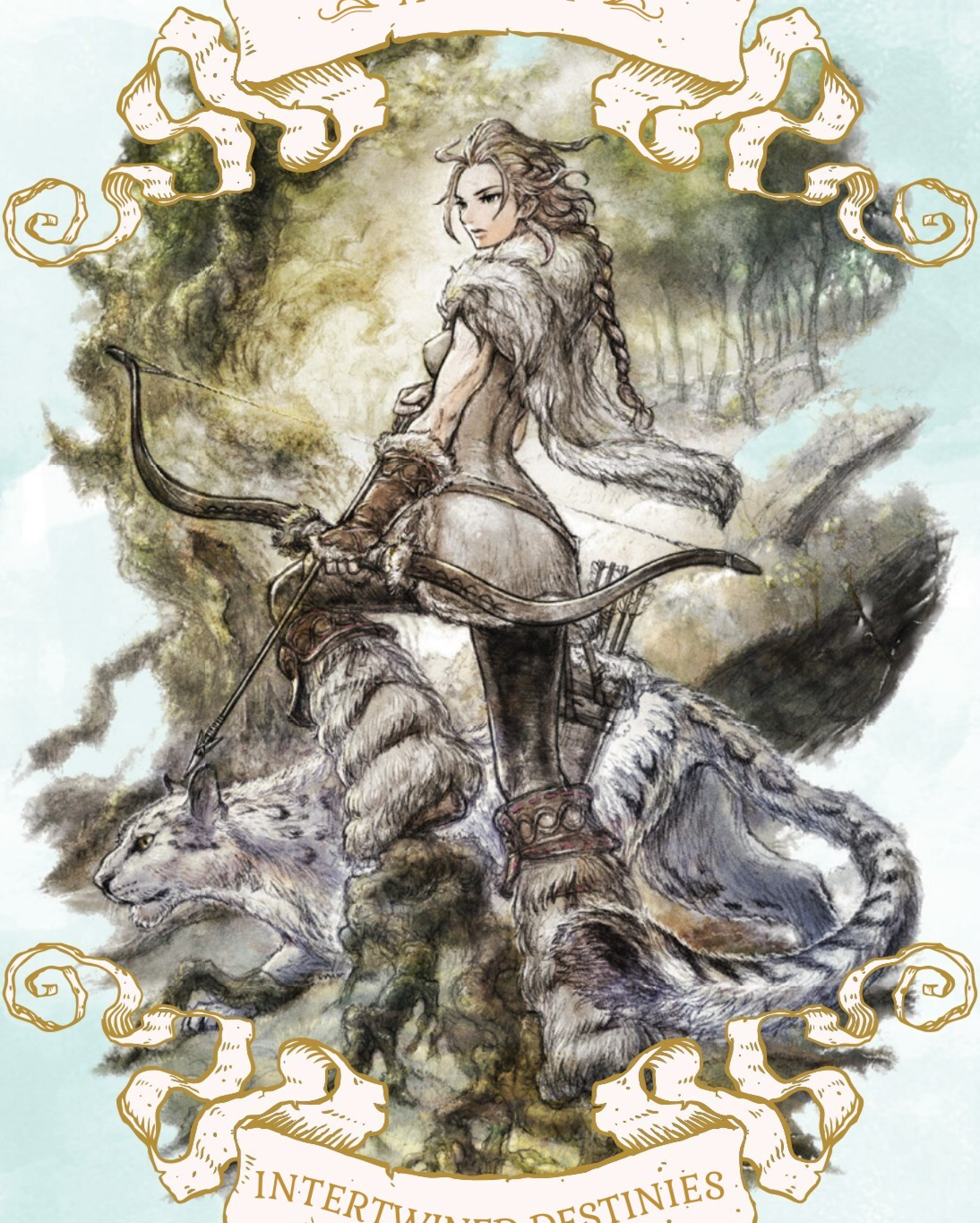
Composer Stewart Copeland's original scores are being used, but the music is now dynamic, shifting in tone when Spyro moves from exploration to combat. It's a small change that goes a long way in heightening the moment of facing off against Toasty the scarecrow, who now has a mischievous grin, fluid animations, and can eventually be burned down to reveal he's a sheep standing on stilts.

The second stage we see is Stone Hill, another space that showcases just how big of a difference a detailed field of grass can make in redefining the look of the game. In this area we get a good glimpse at how Spyro's companion Sparx feeds. A sheep turns into a butterfly that is chased and consumed by the colored firefly. Sparx looks a little different, thanks to him having arms and legs, which he uses to express himself more.

From my brief look at Spyro Reignited Trilogy, I was impressed by the visual changes to the environment, but wonder how fans will take to the newly designed dragons, which are a great departure from the original games' vision. Regardless of this one hesitation, this remake looks like it's going to be good fun, and a great way to explore the series that put Insomniac Games on the map. ◆

» Platform Switch » Style 1-Player Role-Playing
» Publisher Nintendo » Developer Acquire, Square Enix » Release July 13

A TALE OF INTERTWINED DESTINIES



Old meets new as eight journeys become one in Octopath Traveler

After a strong first year, Nintendo Switch owners are looking for the next game they can sink hours upon hours into from their couch or on the go. Role-playing games are particularly suited for portable platforms, and this summer delivers an RPG that many Switch owners have been eagerly anticipating. From the team behind the popular Bravely Default and Bravely Second: End Layer, Octopath Traveler expands on concepts explored in those games and ties everything together with a beautiful, distinct art style that mixes pixel art with realism. After playing a couple hours, I'm excited for the ways it harkens back to retro role-playing games through its robust systems and fun turn-based combat.

By Brian Shea

FROM BRAVE BEGINNINGS

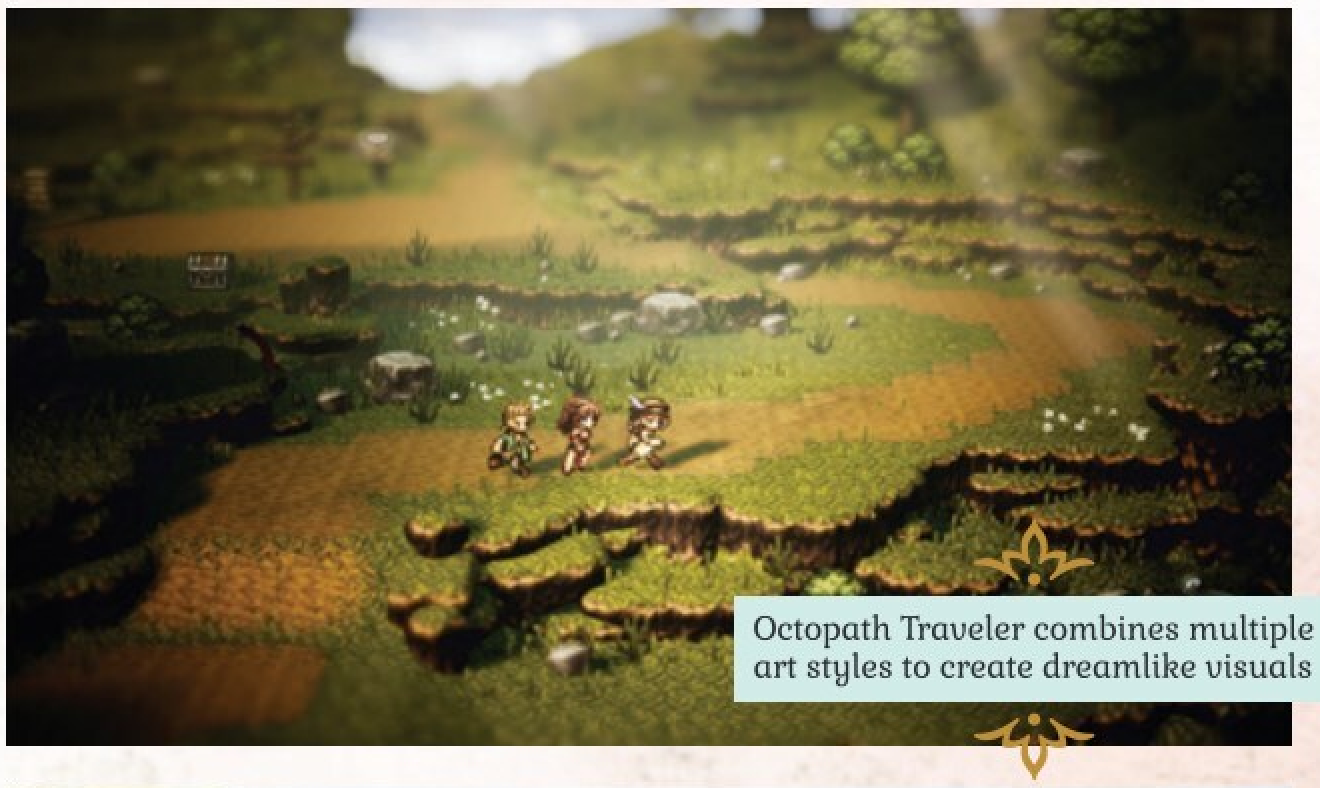
Coming off the Bravely series on 3DS, Acquire and Square Enix wanted to use current technology to craft a new role-playing game with a retro aesthetic to appeal to players now in their 30s who grew up playing 8- and 16-bit RPGs. The team felt that simply going with strict pixel art wasn't exciting enough and wouldn't make the game immediately stand out, so they came up with a hybrid, dreamlike style. "We tried different things, and originally we did try to put everything in pixel-style art," says producer Masashi Takahashi. "But at the end of the day, compared to what we were thinking of, it felt fake and low-quality."

This philosophy of mixing old with new carries into the Octopath Traveler's design as well. Traditional components, like turn-based combat and a job system, combine with modern notions, like a reputation system and the ability to select a main character, to create a revitalized version of the traditional role-playing game. "We wanted to make an old-school RPG that anyone could play," says director Keisuke Miyauchi. "We wanted to make something that was nostalgic, but not mired in these old conventions of old RPGs."

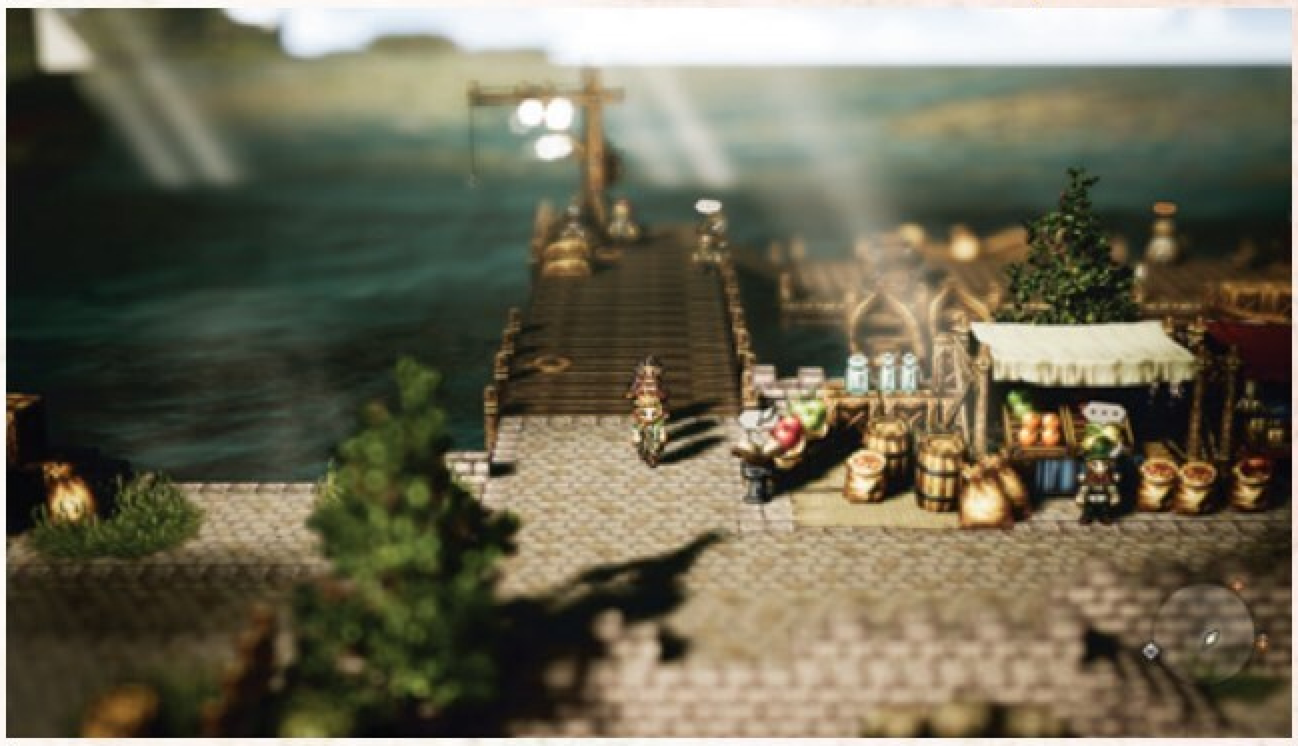
Many games cast you as a set hero joining up with other party members to save the world from encroaching evil. While that approach isn't a bad one, Octopath Traveler doesn't go down that well-worn trail. Instead, you choose one of eight heroes as your main character, then embark on a quest that's more personal than global. Along the way, you meet up with the other potential heroes on their own quests who you can help in order to recruit them.

Octopath Traveler hopes to fulfill the team's desire convey a relatable story about the excitement of going on a journey. This stems from a desire to instill a sense of credibility to the world, characters, and stories. "It might be fiction, but we wanted the player to feel that they could become the characters, and as they're playing the game, feel as though they are the characters," Takahashi says. "We didn't want this to ever tip too much in the direction of fantasy and be in a place where people can't associate with it."

The notion that these stories are more personal is exemplified in travel banter scenes. I see one right after a story beat in which a grateful character gives Alfyn a gift, sparking one of Tressa's memories. While the development team has asked me not to share too many details, the two characters share a brief moment reflecting on the event, with Tressa sharing a story from her past and detailing why it was such a pivotal moment in her backstory. I gain additional insight into her character, adding an extra layer of humanity to the relationship.



Octopath Traveler combines multiple art styles to create dreamlike visuals



Alfyn
An apothecary on a noble quest to heal the sick

Cyrus
A scholar searching for a missing book

H'aanit
A huntress on a quest to find her teacher

Olberic
A warrior seeking vengeance following the murder of his king

TAILORING THE EXPERIENCE

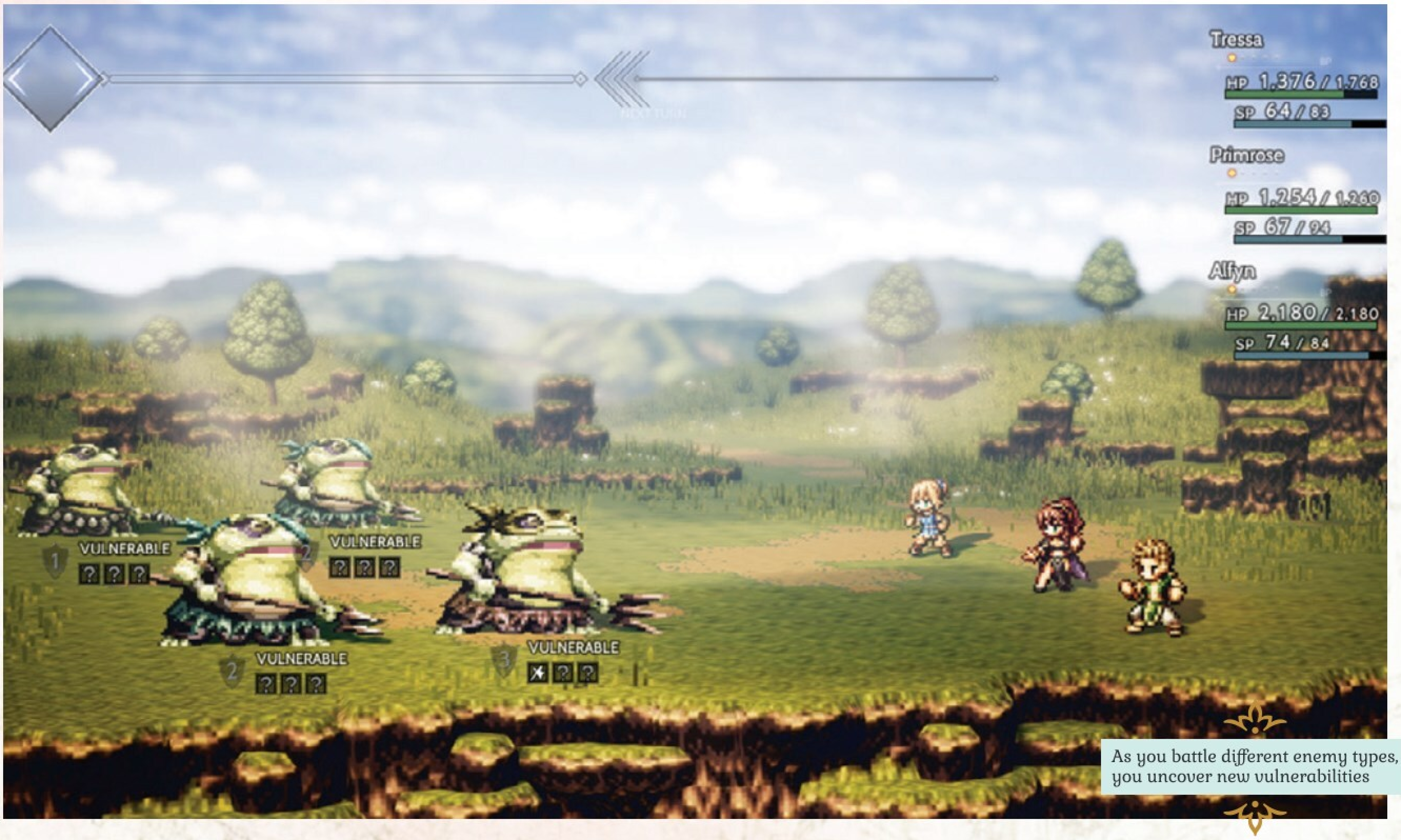
Battles play out in a standard turn-based manner, but with several additional wrinkles. Being able to exploit weaknesses to break enemies, while also saving up boost to supercharge attacks and abilities leads to more complex battles than simply attacking in turn. My strategy of saving Olberic's boost for three turns, then buffing him with Primrose before unleashing a fully charged sword attack on a broken opponent proves deadly effective. However, the system encourages informed experimentation, and this strategy is hardly the only successful combination I uncover. In another instance, I stagger the opponent using Tressa's primary attack, then use Alfyn's apothecary-concoction skills to exploit the enemy's elemental weakness and turn it into dust.

Combat flows well, and the party members play off each other in strong fashion. However, battles can be lengthy, even when you're over-leveled. Of the two bosses I faced, one low-level creature took around 10 minutes to vanquish, while I lasted about 15 minutes against a high-level boss before being wiped out. The Nintendo representative giving me the demo explained that the boss could take upwards of 45 minutes to defeat. These battles require you to tailor your party and approach to not only use your preferred strategies, but also exploit the weaknesses of the boss. One ill-advised turn can spell disaster in these technical encounters.

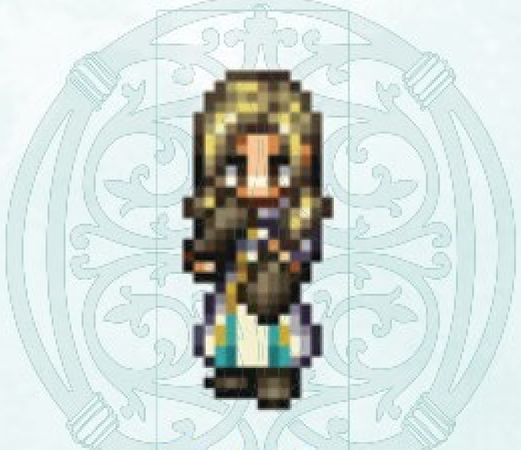
You can further customize your combat approach with a job system that lets you to freely equip and level a second archetype for each character. With my team of Alfyn, Primrose, Olberic, and Tressa, I diversify even further by equipping each character with a second job. Tressa's merchant ability allows her to buy items from NPCs, but I wanted to add some oomph to her combat style. I equip the hunter job as a secondary class, which buffs her stats and opens that suite of abilities to unlock using points earned through gameplay. Experimenting with different combinations is fun, and I'm excited at the possibilities these secondary jobs can create.

As you unlock these job abilities, you obtain passive support skills. I equip my warrior with a counterattack ability and my apothecary with "endless items," which gives items a chance to go unconsumed when used. Later, when I add the hunter H'aanit to my party, I easily swap out Tressa's secondary hunter job for dancer so she can join Primrose in buffing the other party members.

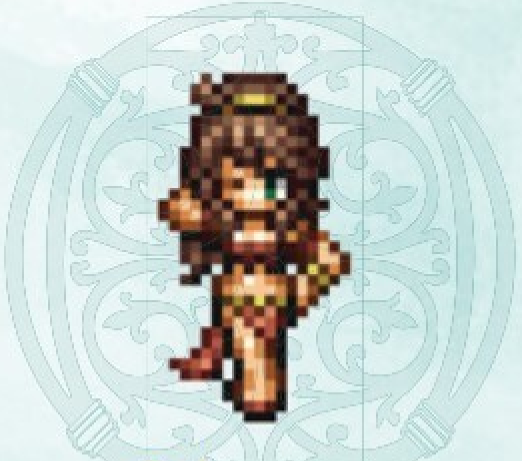
H'aanit's introductory mission is a hunt for a creature her mentor was pursuing. The wooded area is designated level 16, and while most members of my party are level 23, newcomer H'aanit is lower. Still, I use her capture ability to secure various creatures during the journey; the weaker they are in battle, the higher chance of success. Tamed beasts like a vicious hawk or H'aanit's trusty snow-leopard companion can be summoned to attack enemies using their native elements, making H'aanit a great asset in battle if you use the mechanic to build your beast catalog. She soon catches up to the other characters thanks to earning XP from higher-level enemies, allowing me to use her powerful bow attacks as well as her summoned creatures in the boss battle that caps the chapter.



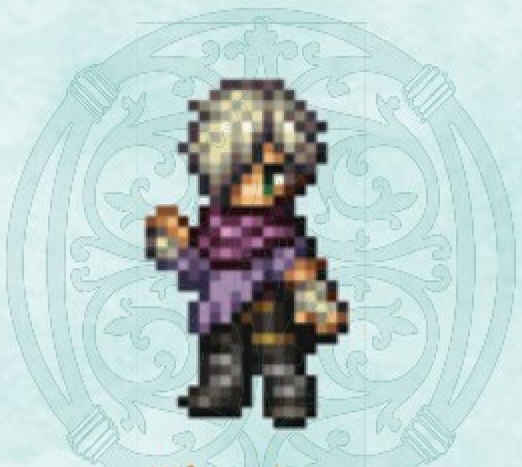
As you battle different enemy types, you uncover new vulnerabilities



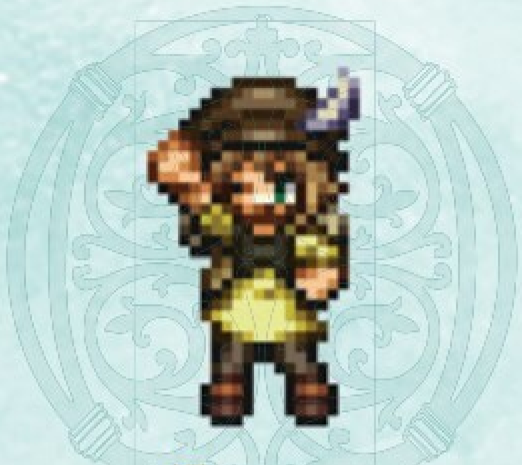
Ophilia
A cleric on a pilgrimage to restore light to her realm



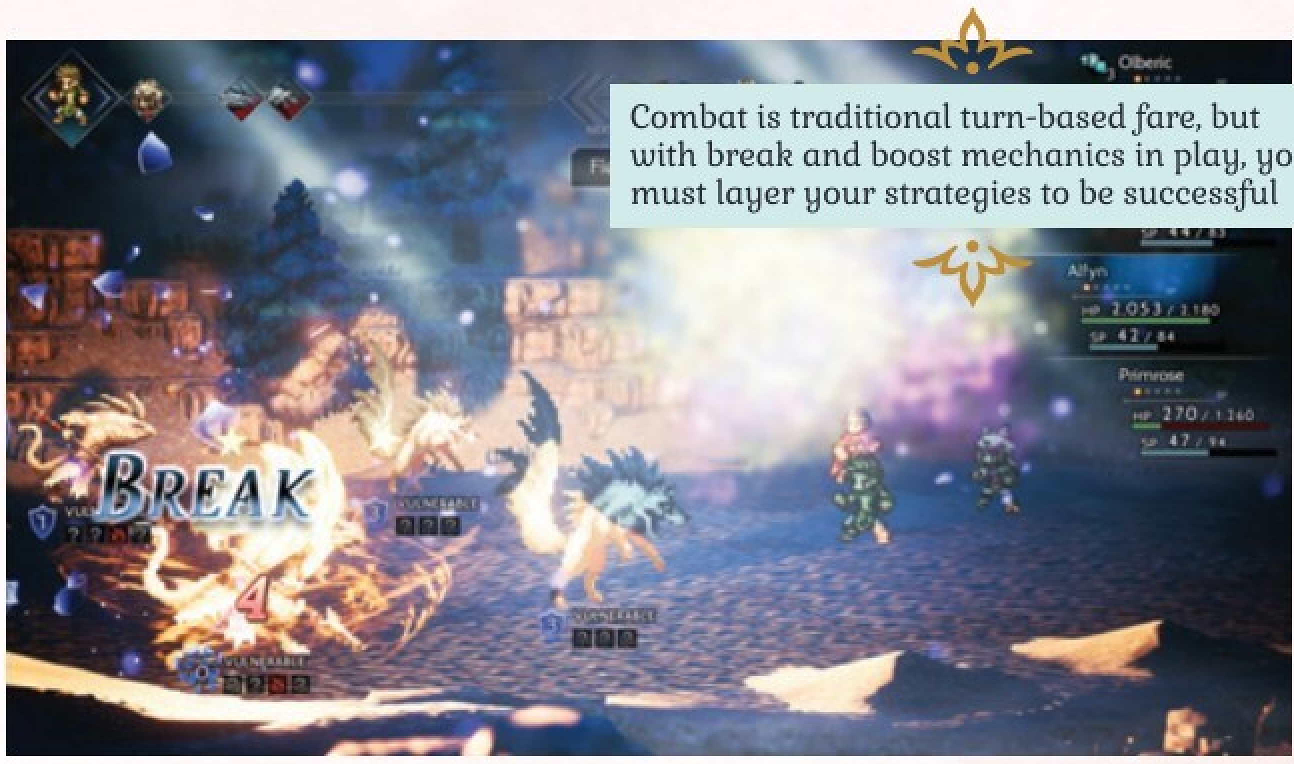
Primrose
A dancer on a mission to track the men who killed her father



Therion
A thief on a mission to steal a rare gem for a client



Tressa
A merchant traveling the world to find her purpose



Combat is traditional turn-based fare, but with break and boost mechanics in play, you must layer your strategies to be successful

REPUTATIONS AT STAKE

In the demo released last fall, players witnessed Primrose and Olberic embarking on quests of vengeance. While those two start their journeys seeking payback, not every character's story begins that way. I see this in an early part of Alfyn's story. In the nascent stages of his questline, the party travels to a town stricken with a brutal cough. The altruistic Alfyn notices something suspicious about this epidemic, so he begins a quest to get to the bottom of the infection. By using Alfyn's "inquire" ability, I learn about the town and find hidden items.

Inquiring is a "path action" – a set of job-specific ways to interact with other characters in the world. Path actions play a massive role in encouraging party diversification, since characters can use their distinct abilities to interact with NPCs in different ways. For instance, Primrose's lets her bring an extra character along with the party, while Tressa's gives her the opportunity to buy exclusive items from NPCs.

Based on which path actions you use, your characters' reputations fluctuate. Both Tressa's and Therion's net you extra items from NPCs, but purchasing with Tressa is considered noble, while stealing with Therion is a rogue act. You can execute a noble path action without fear of repercussion, but it may cost money or require a certain level. Rogue path actions don't cost anything and can be used at any time, but they can hurt your character's reputation in that town if they fail. Damage your reputation too much, and the townspeople might be less receptive to your actions. You can restore your reputation by paying the bartender to talk kindly about your character, but it costs a pretty penny.

I like how for each noble path action, a rogue one exists in contrast. Though Olberic and H'aanit have the respective challenge and provoke path actions, I erred on the side of maintaining their reputations. The last thing I needed was more resistance in completing my mission, and I was spending all my money on stronger gear for my characters. While I didn't have a chance to fully explore the extent of what a damaged reputation means, the concept is intriguing.

EIGHT CHARACTERS, EIGHT STORIES

The eight stories in Octopath Traveler intertwine, giving you a chance to play each hero's narrative regardless of who you choose as your starter character. Each character has his or her own motivations for joining the journey, and as it's structured to this point, each individual story is siloed. Progression only occurs when you travel to the location of their next chapter, allowing the player to experience each storyline as desired. The main character you choose at the start dictates your starting position on the map, as well as where your adventure comes to a close, but you don't need to worry about missing out on the other characters' stories or holding a different save file for each one.

Each chapter I played felt organic to the progression to the story, and I was eager to keep exploring the distinct narratives as my time with the game came to an end. The developers are hesitant to elaborate on any character or story beats or confirm whether the storylines all converge at some point, but how these tales play off each other is enthralling. I can't wait to jump back into the world of Octopath Traveler and learn more about these characters and this beautiful world. ◆

Call of Duty: Black Ops 4

Bold moves for the annual juggernaut

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Activision

» Developer
Treyarch

» Release
October 12

The Call of Duty franchise in the last few years has been an annual tri-pronged assault of content – a campaign, zombies, and multiplayer. Treyarch is shaking things up this year. While still focusing on a triple threat with tons of content, the traditional single-player is gone, and a new mode called Blackout – Call of Duty's take on the insanely popular battle royale genre – seeks to bring the triple-A titan into one of gaming's rising scenes. Set in the near future and taking place narratively between Black Ops 2 and 3, Black Ops 4 eschews the wall-running, jump-boosting zaniness that defined the futuristic offerings in the series and embraces traditional boots-on-the-ground gunplay.

Competitive multiplayer has some significant changes and tweaks. Healing no longer happens naturally over time – you must manually heal with the touch of a button. The process is fast (you won't be sitting there waiting and hiding while a meter fills up), and changes gameplay quite a bit. You can dip into combat, duck out for some extremely fast cover for a heal, and reload and be back up shooting immediately. The fast pace of Call of Duty gameplay doesn't suffer for the mechanic, and it creates intense situations.

Each weapon has specific attachments, including the new operator mod. The operator mod lets you add a signature power to your weapon that's much stronger than a sight or a stock, allowing you to differentiate yourself from other wielders of the same gun, like adding vision-suppressing fire to a weapon. In addition, Black Ops 4 features true predictive recoil, meaning you can master a weapon down to the kick, knowing exactly how your rifle will buck every time.

Most Call of Duty players are familiar with gazing at the minimap for valuable intel about enemy positions. Black Ops 4 features fog of war that can obscure visibility on the map. Suppressed weapons won't break the fog after firing, so stealthy tactics may pay off more than ever.

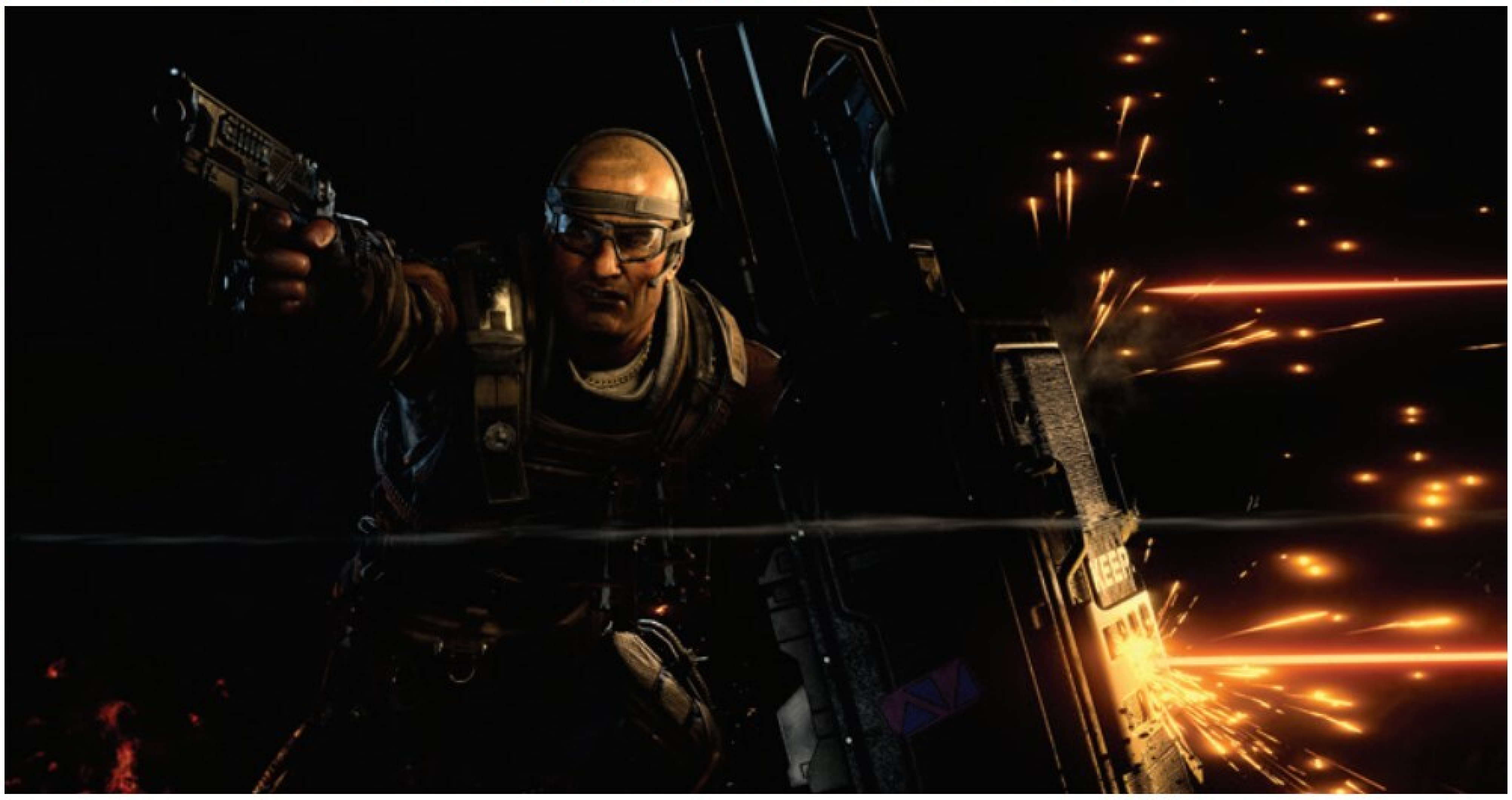
Players can select one of eight specialists to play as, each with special abilities that can turn the tide of battle. Single-player "story" missions familiarize players with each specialist's kit while advancing a narrative. In the version of the game I played, the specialists are also limited to one on a team to prevent ridiculous ability stacks. These abilities are often teamplay-centric, so there's clearly a push toward teamwork and group play over simple spawning and shooting. Specialist abilities allow for enhanced healing, mobility, area denial, fog-of-war recon, setting up mobile spawn points, area blockading, and more, making defending or sieging that Hardpoint more engaging.

Treyarch is known for its zombies, putting the mode on the map for what would become a franchise staple. Black Ops 4 features three different zombie experiences on launch, new extensive customization options, difficulty selection, seasonal content, the ability to play with bots, and an additional new way to play known as Zombie Rush. That mode likely focuses more on the shooting and less on the insanely twisted worlds, secrets, and puzzles that zombie mode is known for. The first experience revealed is known as IX, in which a cryptic trailer shows our four new protagonists slaughtering zombies en-masse with melee weapons in an ancient gladiatorial arena – a big shift, even for the weirdness of zombies. Given that the characters do some sort of spooky oracle ritual to travel to the arena, my prediction here is that the mode will rely heavily on time travel, perhaps taking our characters to nine different historical or mythological areas.

The second experience is Voyage of Despair, a heist mission gone wrong on the *Titanic* that ends up turning everyone on the ship (except our heroes) into zombie abominations. The same ancient cult symbolism is on display here as in IX, so although these are two different zombie encounters, they likely share the same overarching story.

The final zombie experience is Blood

Face off against an ancient evil order in multiple zombie modes



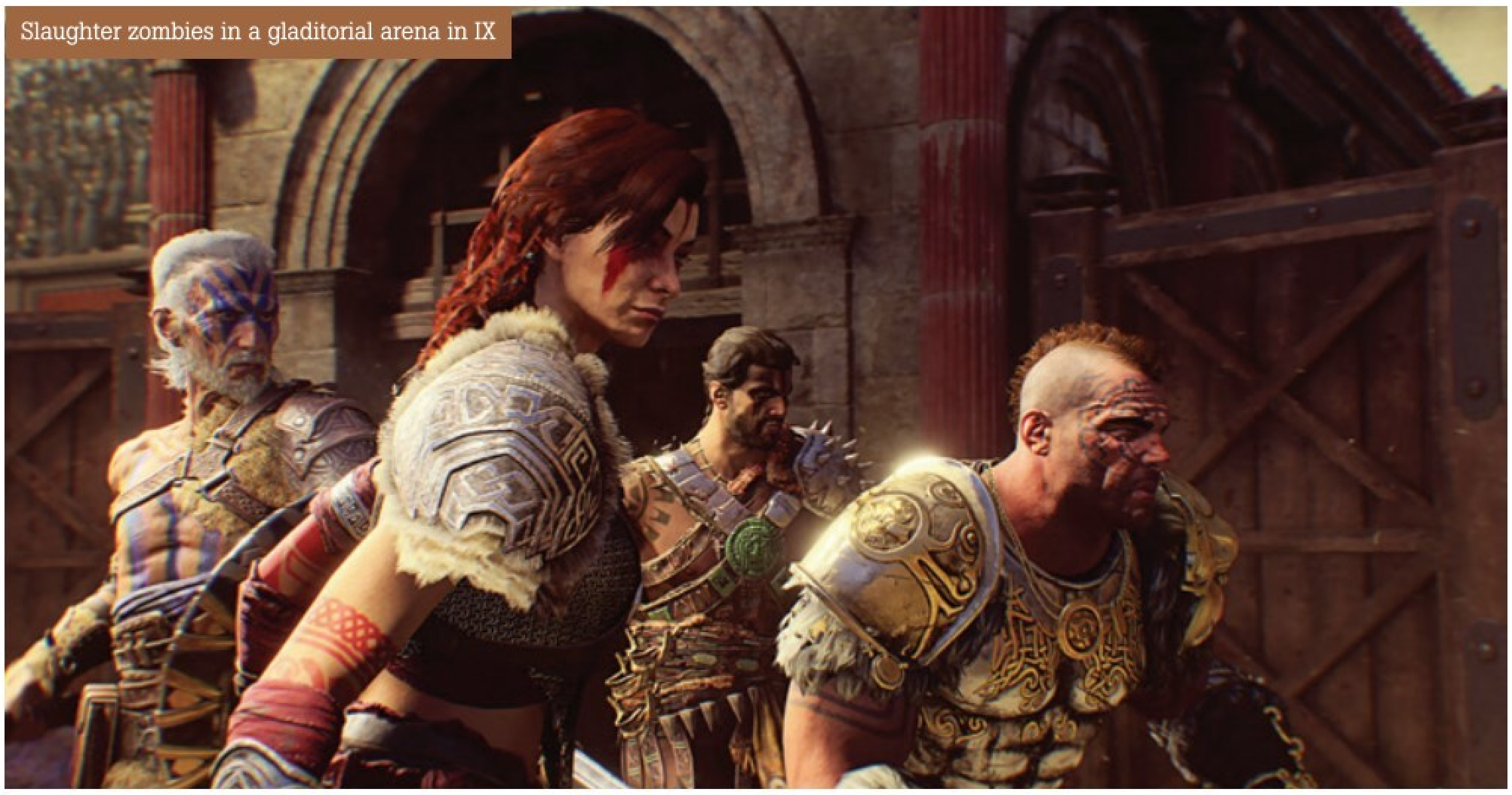
of the Dead, which a short teaser trailer indicated would be related to the Mob of the Dead experience from Call of Duty: Black Ops 2.

Finally, Blackout is Call of Duty's take on battle royale. A map Treyarch claims is 1,500 times as large as a traditional Call of Duty multiplayer map featuring land, air, and sea vehicles houses elements taken from the entire Black Ops franchise. It's a celebration of sorts, with locations and other aspects on the map influenced by iconic Call of Duty fare.

While many aspects of the mode are a complete mystery for now, the teaser gives us a lot to think about. Since battle royales are all about starting from nothing and scrambling to find some gear, it wouldn't make sense to hit the map as a decked out specialist or grizzled zombie slayer. The huge host of characters is likely avatar or skin related, letting players sport Black Ops fashion while they attempt to be the last one standing.

Some players may be put off by the lack of a single-player campaign, but Black Ops 4 is showing all the signs of being absolutely jam-packed with the content from Call of Duty I love. The different modes are loaded with staying power far beyond what an eight-hour campaign would provide. It's time for the franchise to try something new, and I'm eager to see much more on Zombies and Blackout. » **Daniel Tack**

Slaughter zombies in a gladitorial arena in IX



Battlefield V

DICE heads back to the war where it all started

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(64-Player Online)

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
DICE

» Release
October 19

Sixteen years after DICE first debuted Battlefield 1942, the studio is finally returning to the war that kicked off one of the most successful shooter franchises of all time. Battlefield V brings soldiers back to World War II, but don't expect it to be a rehash of battles you've fought before. This ambitious sequel dramatically changes the franchise in some fundamental ways that could reverberate for years if implemented well.

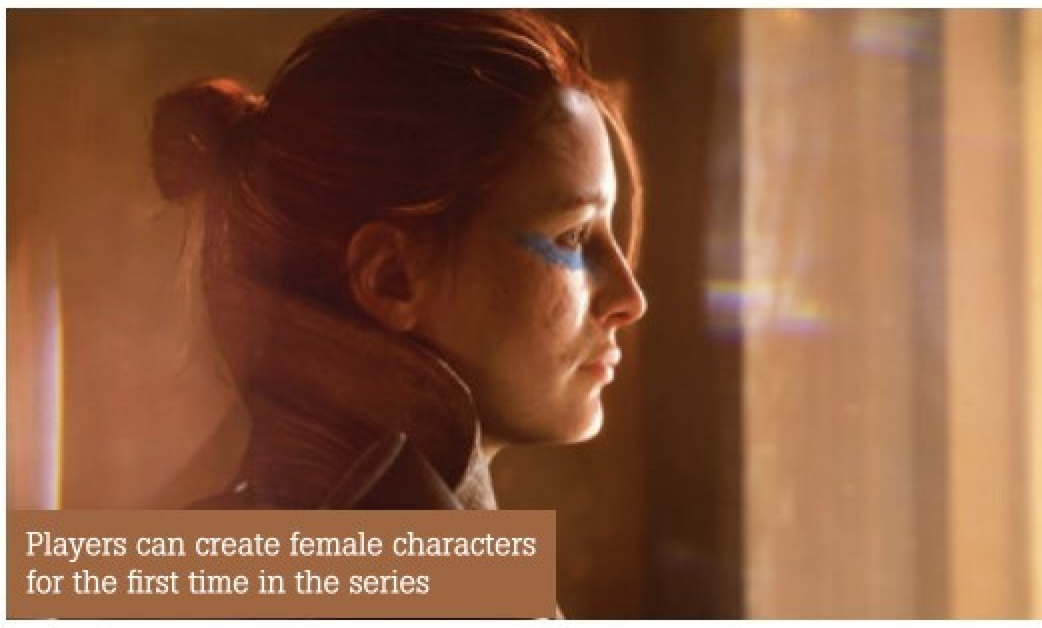
In returning to World War II, DICE had other plans than a nostalgic trip down memory lane. "To be frank, we've all played it – we've all been there," says senior producer Andreas Morell. "We've all stormed the beaches of Normandy and cleared every bunker in France. I think some of us can probably navigate the countryside by muscle memory alone. And we've also seen the movies. So for us, we really wanted to give our players something new." Battlefield V instead takes players to new places like Norway, the Netherlands, and North Africa to expand beyond the common settings and tell new stories about the war.

The centerpiece of this effort is Grand Operations, a new twist on the popular Operations mode featured in Battlefield 1. While the last version had players fighting for control of multiple objectives across multiple maps, Grand Operations further extends the variability by introducing new modes as the battle advances through four stages. For instance, the first stage could have attackers parachuting in behind enemy lines in Rotterdam to take out long-range artillery preventing invading forces from attacking. The second would concentrate on the head-to-head clash of ground forces after that artillery is neutralized, and the third stage would switch maps to a bombed out version of Rotterdam. Should the invading force achieve a decisive victory at this third stage, the battle would be over. But if it's close, a fourth stage called Final Stand plays out. Here, supplies are scarce and once a squad is wiped they cannot respawn. This frantic war of attrition forces squads to work even more closely together, a common thread that extends throughout Battlefield V.

We've all played Battlefield matches where half your team is composed of lone wolves content to sit in an elevated position and snipe rather than support the cause. In Battlefield V, these losers won't gain access to the game's most interesting weapons. As squads complete objectives and support each other, they gain squad reinforcement points. These can be used to acquire valuable assets like supply drops, smoke barrages, specialized vehicles only your squad can spawn into, and even a volatile V1 missile that can punch a hole in the finest defenses.

To further stress teamwork, DICE is introducing some new mechanics as well. For the first time in the series, any squad member regardless of class can revive their comrades. These revives take significantly longer and give back less health than if a medic performs the duties, but it's helpful in a pinch. Battlefield V also introduces fortification to the mix. The game's impressive destructibility can make it hard to find cover in later stages of matches. Now, any soldier can rebuild parts of

The player customization now extends to clothing, hair, and accessories



Players can create female characters for the first time in the series

structures and deploy sandbags, resupply points, and anti-tank objects. The support class has even more tools at its disposal, including building or repairing stationary weapons. The best (and most explosive) example of renewed focus on teamplay is the towing system. Who doesn't want to hitch an AA cannon on the back of a tank and drive around with both cannons firing?

Other oft-requested gameplay changes include a new ballistics system that makes it easier to learn burst patterns for various weapons and the ability to throw back grenades.

Multiplayer isn't the only front receiving reinforcements from DICE. After years of lackluster campaigns, Battlefield 1's short-story approach to single-player content won over fans and critics alike. War Stories returns for Battlefield V with new tales based on real events that the studio hopes reverberate emotionally.

Beyond its single-player ambitions, Battlefield V also introduces a brand new four-player cooperative mode called Combined Arms. DICE built a mission generator system so it can continually push out new challenges for the mode. Since it incorporates the same squad mechanics as the multiplayer mode, DICE hopes new players can use Combined Arms to familiarize themselves with the complex systems, which should be a boon before jumping into the competitive multiplayer.

Regardless of which mode you're playing, DICE plans to continually provide new experiences via Tides of War, its new approach to post-game content. Gone are the days of splitting the player base between those who pay for access to new maps and those with the base game. Moving forward, all the content is accessible to everyone. These new content drops are scheduled every couple months and could feature new War Stories, Combined Arms missions, multiplayer maps, multiplayer modes, and rewards.

All these rewards feed into a robust progression system that lets you customize your characters, weapons, and vehicles to your heart's content. For the first time, you can alter your soldier's looks from head to toe, changing their face, hair, face paint, and clothing. The game's first trailer even showed off a mechanical arm, so expect some unique offerings. Customization extends to unique perks you can put on your character class or vehicle, and if you want to switch things up you can create a new addition to your Company.

To improve its storied franchise, DICE is looking inward, addressing longstanding community grievances and exploring new ways to push Battlefield's unique brand of squad-focused gameplay forward. Stay tuned in the coming months for hands-on gameplay impressions of Battlefield V, as well as more details on War Stories and Combined Arms. » **Matt Bertz**

Red Dead Redemption II

Setting the Wild West ablaze

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One

» Style
1-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Rockstar Games

» Developer
Rockstar Games

» Release
October 26

Five months from Red Dead Redemption II's release, Rockstar Games finally loosened its lips about its highly anticipated return to the Western genre. We now have a greater understanding of how this open-world adventure plays out and how Rockstar hopes to evolve the genre yet again.

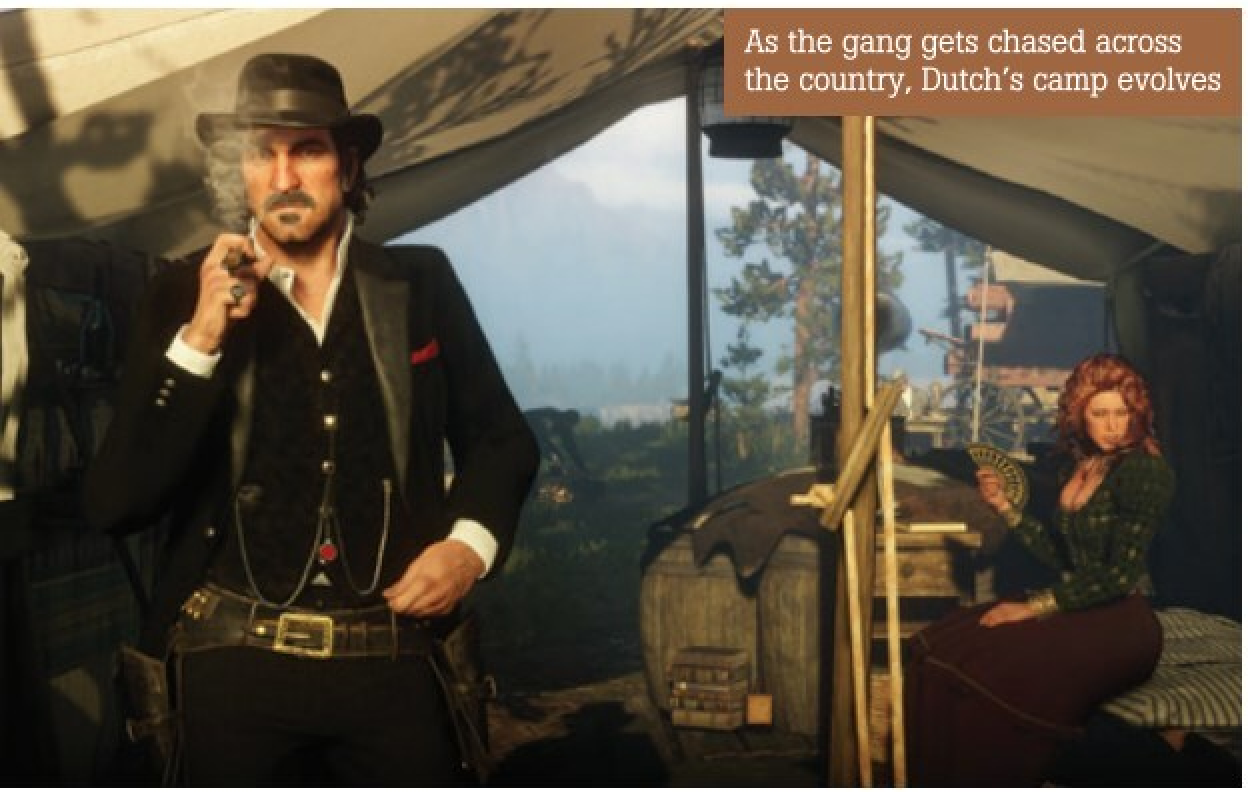
Set 12 years before the events of the last game, this prequel, (or "companion piece" as Rockstar calls it) follows the dark days that led to the demise of Dutch van der Linde's infamous gang. After a Blackwater heist goes awry, the gang finds themselves being chased across the country by lawmen and bounty hunters alike. Players take on the role of Arthur Morgan, Dutch's right-hand man, for the entirety of the game. Morgan shoulders a lot of the responsibility for keeping this band of ne'er-do-wells together.

Since the gang is on the run, they set up camp on the outskirts of whatever town they happen to be near at that juncture of the narrative. This social hub is where the players get to know the rest of the gang members, which includes familiar faces like Bill Williamson, Javier Escuella, and Dutch, plus several new personalities as well. Yes, the gang includes a young John Marston, who we get to see before he has his falling out with Dutch. Expect to go on missions with unique combinations of these wanted men and women throughout the game. We know only a handful survive the next decade, so expect more than a couple to die in a blaze of glory.

As the gang fights for survival, you can guarantee they need to get their hands even dirtier to stay arm's length from the law. Early trailers show bank robberies, train hijackings, fistfights, and even allusions to infighting amongst gang members.

The beloved hunting system returns as well, with a renewed commitment to realism. Killing animals with a bow will yield a cleaner cut of meat and

Yes, that's a young John Marston. He returns as a member of Dutch's gang in Red Dead Redemption II



As the gang gets chased across the country, Dutch's camp evolves

better pelt than a bullet-ridden carcass, and if you don't rush your fresh kill to the cook or merchant the high sun may rot your meat. Keeping your gang well supplied is a supplementary objective of the game, but how much you engage with this system is up to you. Fellow campers may grumble if Morgan skips his chores, but they'll live.

Rockstar has ambitions for Red Dead Redemption II far beyond telling a tale of the decline of outlaw culture in the Wild West; the game also serves as the studio's latest push to further open-world game design. By strengthening the connective tissue between the myriad systems driving the game, Rockstar hopes to dissolve the visible stitches between gameplay, cinematics, missions, and emergent play to make it feel like a more seamless experience. The world and characters are constantly aware of Morgan's presence, and the player has a new level of agency when interacting with them. Red Dead Redemption II doesn't transition away from the game camera into cutscenes when talking to characters, and new missions arrive organically through conversation, not necessarily creating distinctions between golden-path story missions and side missions. They are simply activities that present themselves as you live in this world.

Players have more control over how these interactions play out as well. Upon first coming across a person, Morgan could act politely, intimidate, or even rob them. How the person reacts depends on their disposition. They also take note of whether Morgan's weapon is holstered and respond accordingly, feeding into a much more detailed version of the honor system from the last game.

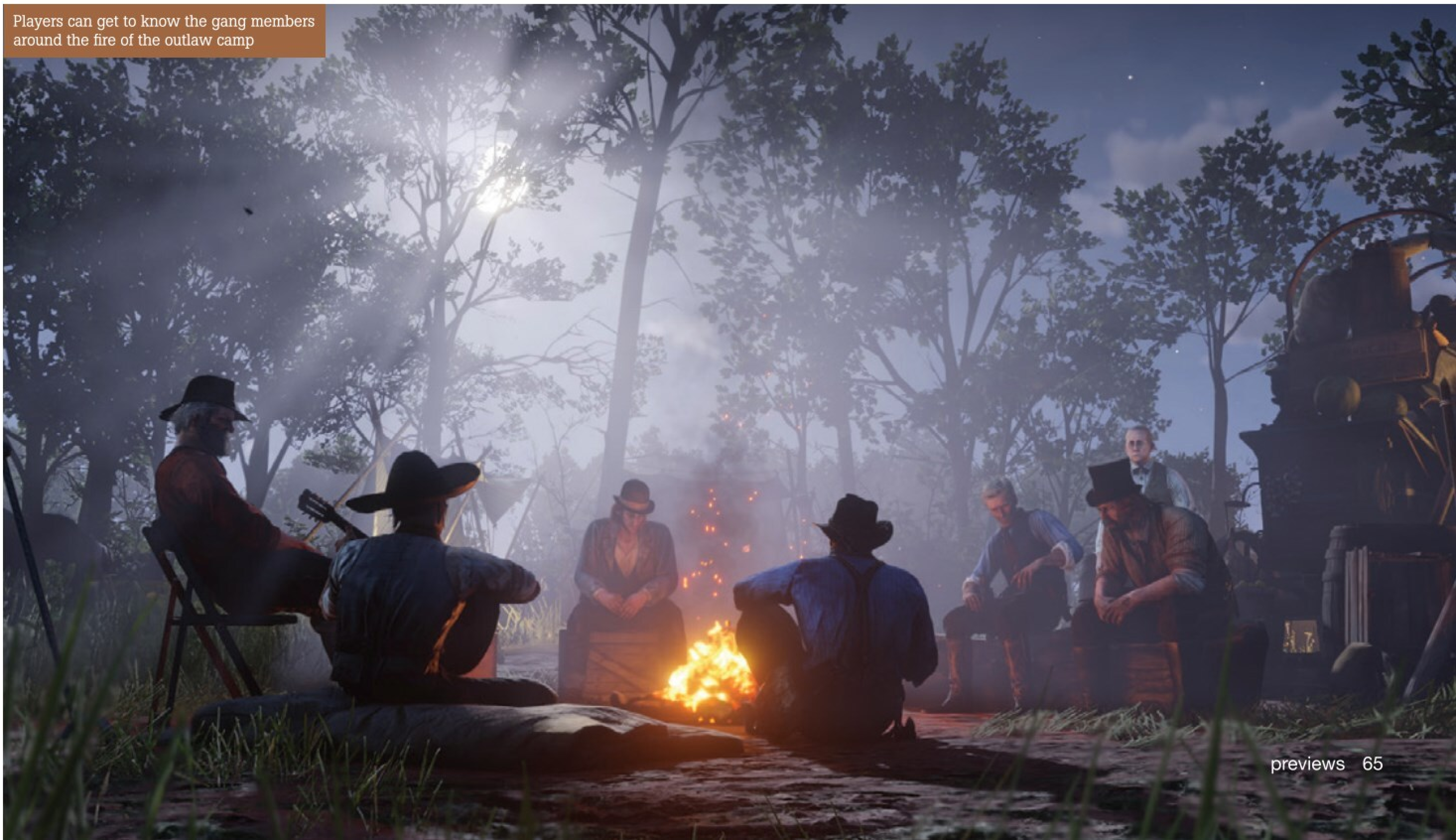
A good horse can get a frontiersman through many a bind, and Rockstar hopes to make this bond between man and mare deeper than ever before. Horses were very gamified and disposable in Red Dead Redemption; you could whistle anywhere in the world and your thoroughbred would gallop to your side, and breaking in your horse only took a short while. Red Dead Redemption II amps up the realism in this department. The more you ride, feed, and groom your horse, the deeper the bond between you two forms. This is critical for the horse becoming more comfortable in precarious situations like shootouts and coming across nature's most formidable predators. If your bond is weak, the horse may throw you off its back and gallop away from the threat, taking your supplies and best weapons along with it. This makes training your horse (and keeping them alive) a critical component to RDR II. Should your horse die, you must start this process over again. You may shed a tear for more than just one reason.

The more we learn about Red Dead Redemption II, the more we're itching to saddle up and ride out. We're still waiting for information on how Rockstar plans to evolve its online offerings, so stay tuned in the coming months.

» **Matt Bertz**

Westward Expansion

Red Dead Redemption II returns to some familiar locations like Blackwater, but you can also expect to visit several new areas as well, including snowy mountains, deep south swamps, and even industrialized cities far bigger than any of the towns in the original. The demo showed to various press outlets took place in a region called New Hanover, which featured rivers, forests, and mountains of its own. Even though these frontier destinations are sparser by definition, Rockstar is taking measures to make these wilderness and town environments teem with life. Flies buzz around the forests, farmers herd sheep over rolling pastures, and the small towns bustle with daily activity.



Players can get to know the gang members around the fire of the outlaw camp

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

Carrying on tradition

» **Platform**
PS4 • PC
» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
» **Publisher**
Square Enix
» **Developer**
Armor Project,
Square Enix
» **Release**
September 4

After announcing last year that Dragon Quest XI would get a North American release, Square Enix has finally confirmed which platforms it's coming to. While many stateside fans have been pining for a Switch version, DQ XI has only been announced for PS4 and PC. It appears the company has no plans for the 3DS iteration to come here either, and seeing as the Switch version has yet to debut in Japan, it's unclear if or when we'll eventually see that one. If you're not keen on waiting for the biggest Dragon Quest adventure to date, however, then you'll be happy to know the PS4 and PC versions are coming packed with extras and the release date is merely months away. We recently went hands-on with the game, which, like past entries, includes British voiceovers for the Western release. We got a good look at party member Sylvando and an intense boss battle.

The demo focuses on a desert area, featuring the kingdom of Gallopolis. Gallopolis is known for its horse races and fearless desert knights. The party visits in search of a mysterious branch that can aid them in stopping a dark force from taking over the world. As soon as I enter the vast landscape, I notice the new dash function. This is a nice addition and makes getting around much faster and easier than it was in the original Japanese version.

My main quest is to visit a sultan whose son, Prince Faris, is having his coming-of-age ceremony where he must prove himself in a horse race. The prince says he'll convince his father to give us the branch we need if we do him a favor. He takes us to the circus to discuss it in depth, where I find out he can't ride horses at all, begging our hero to pretend to be him for the big race. At the circus, a cheeky character named Sylvando appears. Sylvando is a jester, and a show-off through and through, spitting fire, juggling knives, and cracking jokes. Later when I take the prince's place in the horse race, Sylvando appears as one of my opponents.

Horse racing is a new minigame for the series. The controls are basic: Hold down a button to gallop, press another to slow for turns, and run through green swirls to gain speed and stamina. Win or lose this race, you prove your skills well enough to the sultan, but Sylvando catches on to the farce. Before much more can be done, a giant, yellow, scorpion-like enemy named The Slayer of the Sands is killing knights left and right. The sultan asks Prince Faris to take care of it, and once again he asks for your help so no one can discover his incompetence.

The turn-based Dragon Quest battle system hasn't changed much since its inception. As this boss battle proves, though, it's not about just choosing an attack. You are challenged to use your abilities, magics, buffs, and debuffs accordingly. To win the battle against this vicious beast, I use a balanced strategy, having two characters focus on healing, buffs, and magic, while the others tap into their special abilities. Special abilities can inflict status ailments such as poison or sleep, or have elemental strength. One of my characters has a spell that automatically deals damage when the enemy attacks, which I make good use of, wearing down the giant scorpion to ensure the prince's success. Sylvando is also along for the battle, but the A.I. controls him. He won't reveal his reasons for coming, which I'm sure is explored later in the game.

I won't spoil what happens with the prince's facade, but I will say there's a cool moment that occurs after the battle. If you're a fan of the series or just itching for a classic RPG, Dragon Quest XI should be on your radar.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

Valkyria Chronicles 4

Coming back with promise

The first Valkyria Chronicles was a cult hit, tantalizing strategy/RPG fans with its beautiful, watercolor-like graphics and hard-fought battles. Since then, the series has meandered along with PSP sequels and the misguided spin-off, Valkyria Revolution. Valkyria Chronicles 4 looks to be a return to form, mirroring the first game, but widening the scope and enhancing combat options. I recently went hands-on with the game, and am happy to report I got so absorbed I didn't want to stop playing.

In Valkyria Chronicles 4, you play as Claude Wallace, who chronicles in a journal the history of the second Europan War. Claude is a determined lieutenant of Squad E, but isn't calm or collected. Claude's hands shake before the first battle, talking about how his squad couldn't see what the war would cost them. "This is still a tale of war, sacrifice, and conflicted loyalties," says associate producer Andrew Davis. "As Federation forces press onward in their last-ditch attempt to take the Imperial capital, the members of Squad E will face questions that challenge their view of the world. What is an acceptable cost of victory? Is the enemy of your enemy your friend?"

The story is set concurrently with the same struggle for control over Europa as Valkyria Chronicles 1 and 3. "The game doesn't depend on any knowledge of the previous titles, but there are a few references to events of Valkyria Chronicles 1 that will serve as little 'Aha!' moments for longtime fans and tie the timelines together," Davis says.

My demo played very similarly to the original game; you use action points to move your individual units for superior positioning. This may mean hiding along an enemy's path, where they'll likely venture on their turn, ready to ambush them. You can take down opponents quickly by targeting their weak points, such as using your sniper to land a headshot or attacking the engine ports of a tank. New to this entry is an armored personnel carrier, which units can climb aboard for safe-keeping while traversing the battlefield.

A new sequence called "Last Stand," triggers as a soldier is close to death, giving you the chance to choose one final action, such as activating a counterattack or giving a squadmate a stat boost and the commander an extra command point. "The unit will still collapse afterwards and require evacuation, but Last Stands are a dramatic way to ensure their sacrifice wasn't in vain," Davis says.

The Grenadier is the only new class in the game, but according to Davis it's one of the most significant combat additions. I noticed this quickly in my demo, as the class carries a heavy mortar and launches explosives. You must line up your attacks accordingly, lobbing them in an arc; they can take out groups of enemies with one hit, even those hiding behind walls. "While [Grenadiers] are relatively mobile, it takes them some time to transition from 'ready to move' stance and 'ready to fire' stance, due to the complicated mortar setup process," Davis explains. This leaves the units defenseless for a bit, so it's better to keep them in the back with your supports.

During your battles, you meet a large cast of squad members with distinct personalities, allowing you to form relationships that affect their performance. Returning are "Potentials," traits that provide buffs and debuffs, giving each character their own unique charm. For example, Tank Freak gives one character a defensive boost when he's near a tank, while another nature-loving character receives a lowered defense on roads due to his "Child of Nature" trait. Returning from the PSP iterations are Squad Stories, snippets of story that flesh out characters, culminating in optional side missions designed around these allies. Completing these missions bolster their Potentials, even turning negative traits into bonuses or providing co-op attacks.

Playing Valkyria Chronicles 4 only made me more excited for its release. It feels like the journey I've been pining for since the original; it stays true to what made the series unique, while also providing new elements to enhance the strategy experience.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Sega

» **Release**
October 16

Divinity: Original Sin 2 Definitive Edition

Redefining godliness

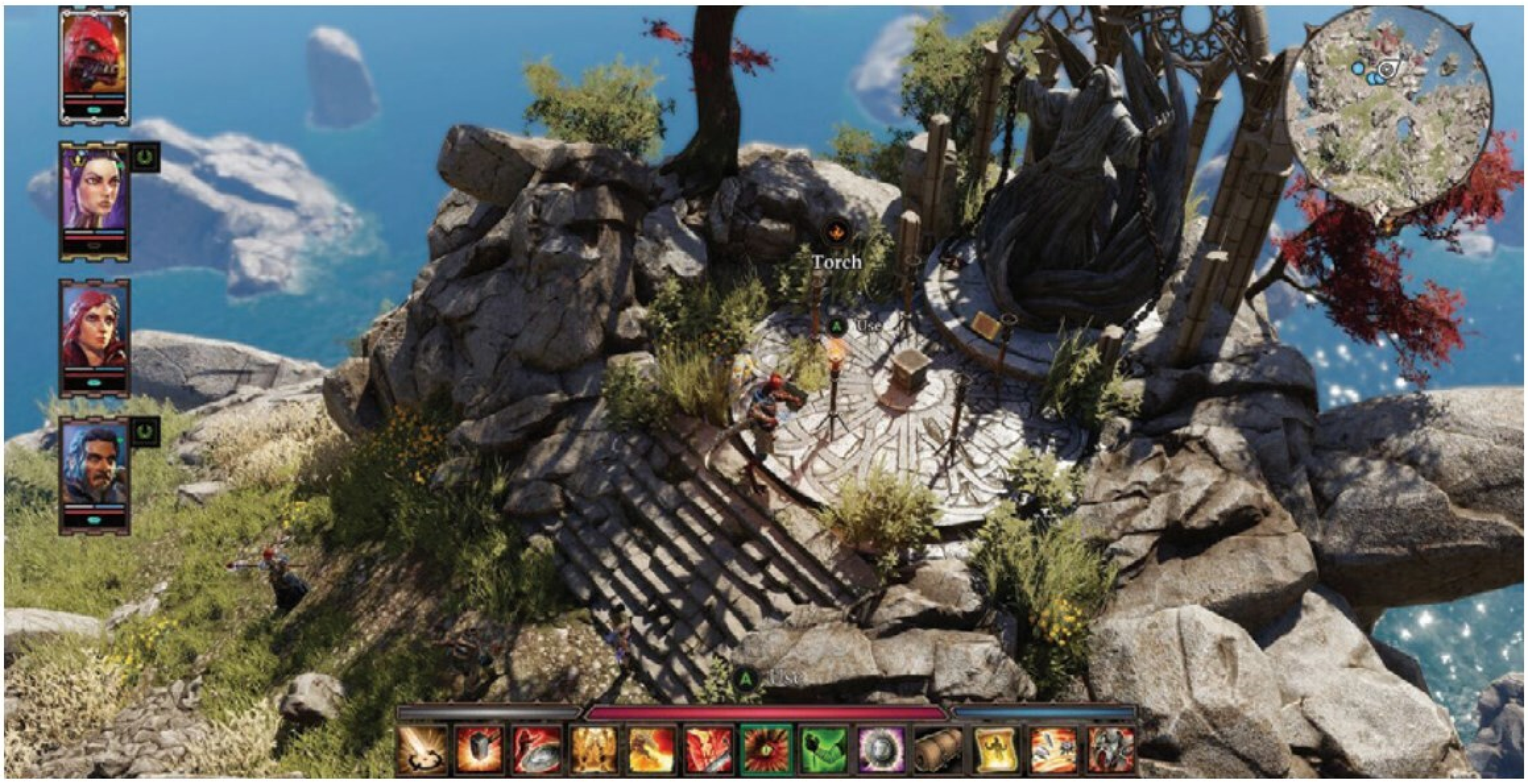
» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player
Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Bandai Namco

» Developer
Larian Studios

» Release
August



Divinity: Original Sin 2 met with commercial and critical success on PC, and now it's coming to consoles with improvements. Larian Studios has pored over reception to the RPG and is making some sweeping changes to get the game ready for a larger audience. PC players will also receive all of the changes and upgrades that come with the definitive edition for free.

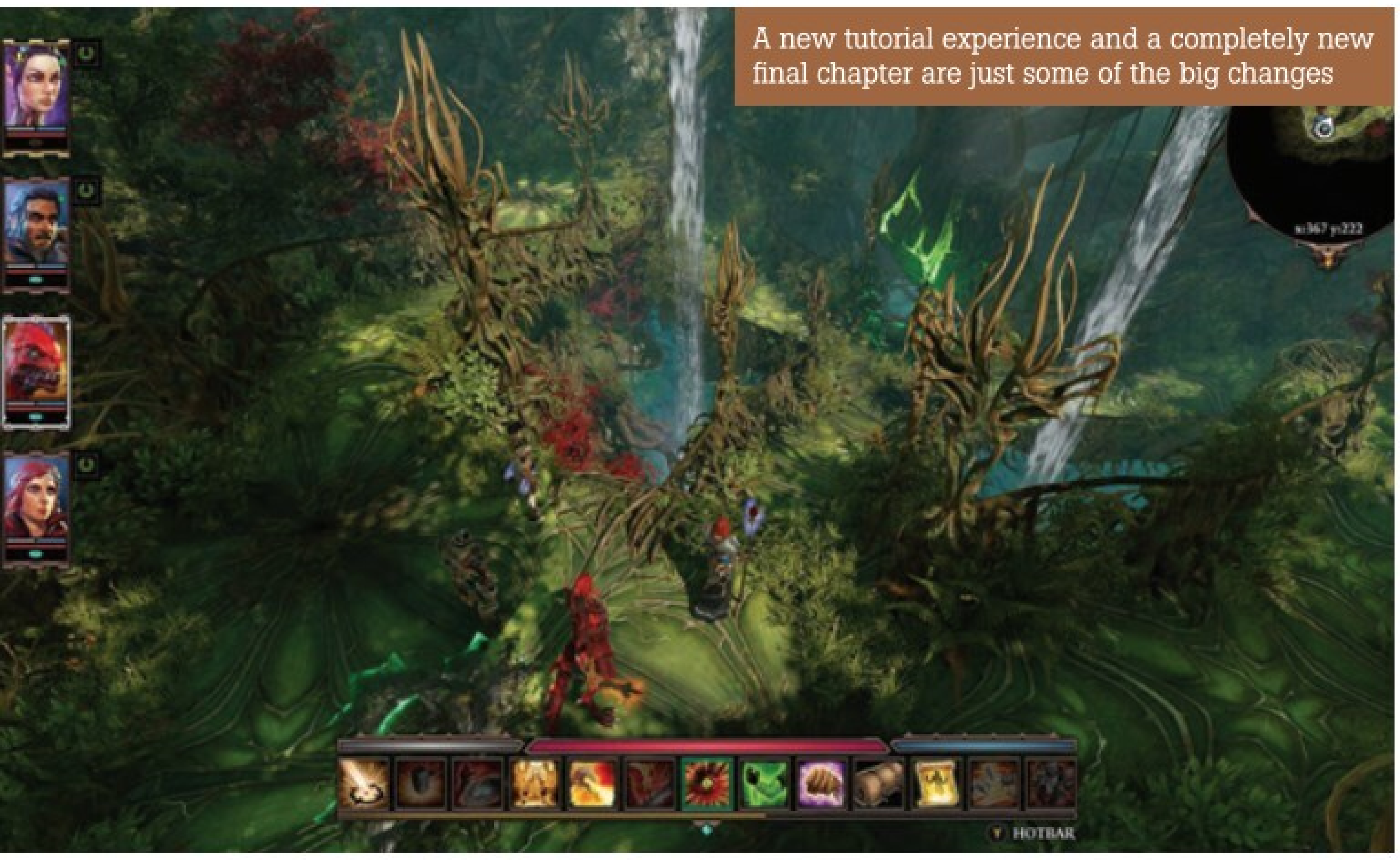
The biggest (and most surprising) change coming is Larian's reworking of the entire act that takes place in the city of Arx. This huge chunk of the final part of the game is being rebuilt from the ground up and is completely different from the experience players had in the original release. PC players can go back and play the original version, but console players only have access to the new version of the endgame – which is promising to be much improved over the puzzle-laden and sometimes confusing trek through the corrupted city. The tutorial segment is also being revamped to better bring players into the fold, especially targeting players new to isometric RPGs and Divinity's combat system.

The journal, a.k.a. the place where you can look over all your quests, was one of the more esoteric and confusing aspects of the launch version. The cryptic texts in the journal left something to be desired when you were attempting to lock down a questline. The new journal in the Definitive Edition eliminates much of the guesswork and unnecessary mystery behind what you need to do to complete quests. Quests should be much easier to understand and better organized in your book, leading you to new adventures easily.

Alongside these large changes comes myriad minor improvements and quality of life enhancements, like flagging items for sale in your inventory, a new "story difficulty" for players who don't want to worry about learning the elemental combat system and just want to dive into the rich lore, map markers, and more.

Tons of new content including characters, dialogue, items, and changes to existing areas are all on deck as well. Larian is even offering a pre-order DLC that features a squirrel who rides on a skeletal cat and believes the end of the world has been foretold by falling acorns – so that should be fun. If competitive multiplayer is your thing, hot seat, pass-the-controller PvP is available, including four new arena levels: Horrorsleep, Oasis, Canals, and Temple.

Players can get their first taste of Divinity: Original Sin 2 Definitive Edition on the Xbox Game Preview program, which offers the first act to explore. The game is scheduled to release in its entirety on PS4, Xbox One, and PC later down the line. » **Daniel Tack**


A new tutorial experience and a completely new final chapter are just some of the big changes

CHARACTER CREATION
Origin
Appearance
Preset
Talents
Tags
Instruments
The Red Prince
SELECT ORIGIN
BACKGROUND
Origin: The Red Prince
Origin Info
Listen to Origin Story
Talents
• Sophisticated
• Spellsong
BUILD PRESET
Fighter
Connectivity
Start Game
Navigate
Main Menu

Two Point Hospital

Resetting a broken funny bone

In 1997, Mark Webley and Gary Carr designed Theme Hospital – a business-management sim where players treated silly diseases like gastric ejections or the uncommon cold. Since then, Webley and Carr have worked on franchises like Black & White, Startopia, and Fable, but the duo always wanted to return to digital health care.

"The most fun I've had making games was on Theme Hospital," Webley says. "It was a small team, and it was hard work, but it was great. We kind of kept thinking that we should do a whole bunch of more of them. Fable was great, and we loved making those games, but we were better at and more in love with these kinds of games."

In 2016, the two developers formed Two Point Studios with the idea of making a series of simulations like Prison Architect or Planet Coaster. First up is a spiritual successor to Theme Hospital, where players build a series of hospitals, managing a growing staff of care givers, and research treatment for rare diseases.

Two Point Hospital recognizes that laughter is the best medicine, so it doesn't take life-threatening illness too seriously. Most of the diseases in Two Point Hospital have humorous names like Friday night fever or verbal diarrhea. One illness, called grey anatomy, drains patients of all their color so they look like old black-and-white cartoons. Two Point's animation even has a whimsical Claymation style in the vein of Aardman Animations features, such as *Wallace & Gromit* and *Shaun the Sheep*.

"The original game was sprite based, which gave it a handcrafted feel," Carr says. "At the time, I was very embarrassed about how old-fashioned it looked, because everyone was doing 3D, but it dated better than those other games. So, for Two Point Hospital, we wanted to pick an art style that wouldn't look out of date in five years. I don't think Aardman's style has changed in over 20."

Fortunately, Two Point Hospital's systems aren't a total joke. Players can dig into the particulars of running a hospital, manage staff's break policies, and even pore over monthly finance spreadsheets. Players who like to optimize their business to the nth degree can tinker with all this minutia, but everyone else can let the game automate these systems. At the same time, Two Point Studio suspects that hardcore players will find several creative ways to play these systems off each other.

"People used to do things in our original games that we didn't even know they could really do," Carr says. "People used to turn up the radiators, which would actually spread infection among cured patients, just so they could make people more sick. They were basically farming illness to make money. We kind of want people to find and exploit all of those kinds of systems. This is a much richer and more intricate game than Theme Hospital."

» **Ben Reeves**

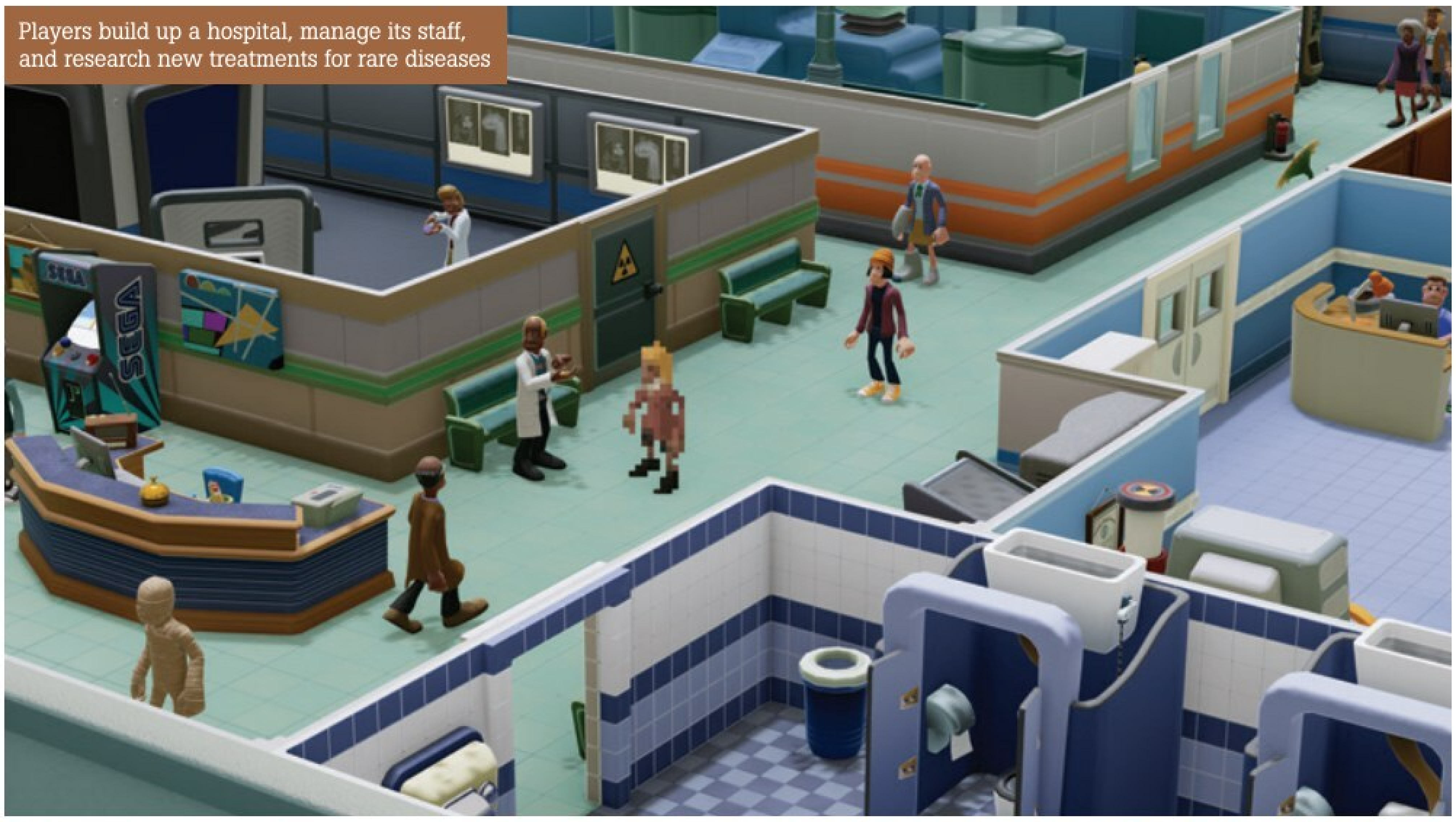
» **Platform**
PC

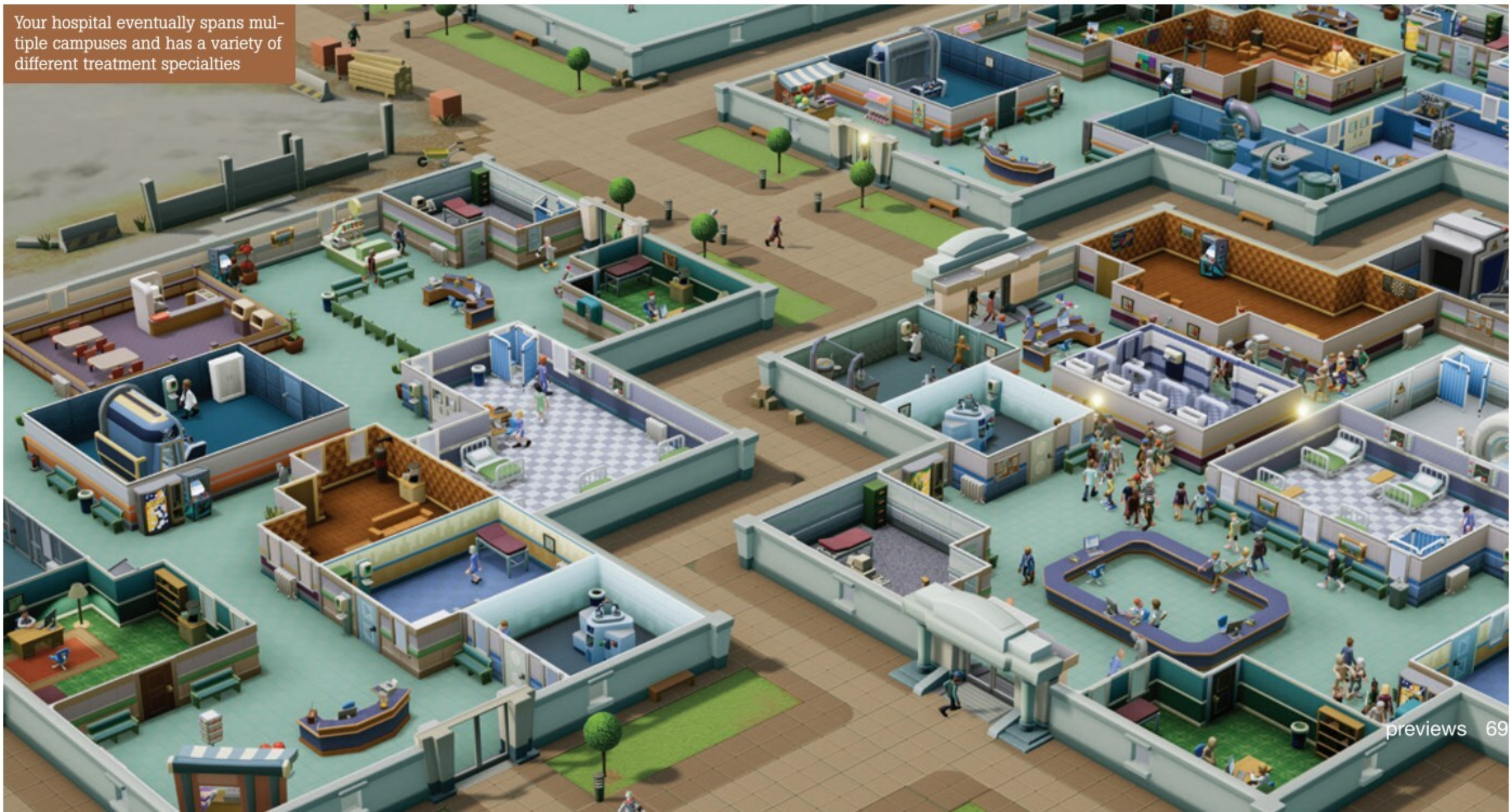
» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Two Point Studios

» **Release**
Late 2018


Players build up a hospital, manage its staff, and research new treatments for rare diseases


Your hospital eventually spans multiple campuses and has a variety of different treatment specialties

Rage 2

Mutants in the sun

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Bethesda Softworks

» Developer
Avalanche Studios/
Id Software

» Release
2019

The original Rage is one of id Software's lesser-known titles, a semi-open world first-person shooter that caught most players' attention because of its beautiful eye-popping technology, though it was a fun romp through a barren wilderness. Rage 2 looks to build upon the defining elements of the first game, creating what publisher Bethesda says is a "true open world," developed as a joint effort from both id Software and Avalanche Studios, the developer behind Just Cause 3 and Mad Max.

Rage 2's teaser trailer showcased a number of wild scenes that could have been taken straight out of from *Mad Max: Fury Road*, with mohawk-sporting punks playing baseball with grenades, and a glimpse of our hero, a ranger named Walker, waging war against mutants and bandits alike. Shortly after this tease, we got a brief hands-on session with the game to see how this promising mixture of design philosophies worked out and talked with both Avalanche and id about working together.

"There's been a lot of imparting knowledge to each other," says id Software's studio director, Tim Willits about the relationship between the two studios."We set up meetings and looked at code, and we shared all that. We basically work on the game until we reach a spot that we don't know about, and then the other person steps in."

Magnus Lindberg, Avalanche's creative director for the project, agrees the relationship has been harmonious and enlightening. "The possibility to work with id Software was fantastic. It was a great opportunity when they asked us to work on a sequel to Rage."

From our brief session with a single mission, it's clear the relationship has borne ripe fruit. Playing as Walker,

It looks like this sequel to Rage will be borrowing a lot from *Mad Max: Fury Road*

I had not only an assault rifle, shotgun, and pistol at my disposal but also a unique set of powers made possible by his nanotrite implants, super-ability granting microcomputers established in the lore of the first game.

The weapons feel powerful, with shotguns literally blowing crazed bandits in half while well-placed pistol and rifle shots pick off limbs and cleave heads. The powers themselves are also a delight, with a slam attack that turns foes into mincemeat and a telekinetic blast that sends foes tumbling from ledges and off roofs. There's also a combo meter that builds as you quickly kill enemies in succession that grants you powerful buffs to your attacks and defense for a brief period. I also got to play with grenades and the Krull-like Wingstick, a homing glaive that will chop at foes' faces repeatedly until they're dead.

Though our demo was brief, and light on story, I immensely enjoyed what I played of Rage 2. The combat is reminiscent of the rhythmic firefights in Doom, with the powers throwing in a new element so that you have new combinations to work with when it comes to taking on foes. Still, the old id Software rule of engagement rings true: Don't ever stop moving if you want to live.

Both id and Avalanche remain tightlipped about the specifics of the game's story, saying that we'll learn more later down the line. However, teaser trailers and our gameplay session have established that the world of Rage 2 is at least more colorful and diverse than the gray and brown barren of the original. Expect to fight mutants and bandits in swamps and jungles as well as the desert.

We'll have to wait until E3 to find out more about the open world that Avalanche and id are creating, which remains my biggest question about Rage 2, but I can say with full confidence that the moment-to-moment gunplay is strong and satisfying, balancing weighty combat with the zaniness you'd expect from Doom and Wolfenstein. Within the 10-minute gameplay demo, I went from being merely curious about Rage 2 to it becoming one of my most hotly anticipated games of 2019. My return to this twisted, hellish desert can't come soon enough. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Mavericks: Proving Grounds

400-player battle royale?!

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
400-Player Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Automaton

» **Developer**
Automaton

» **Release**
2018

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds and Fortnite popularized the 100-player battle-royale experience, but what would happen if the player count doubled, tripled, or even quadrupled? Cambridge, England-based developer Automaton is exploring the ridiculous idea of 400-player last-person standing battles in a forthcoming PC game called Mavericks: Proving Grounds.

If you're trying to wrap your brain around how a game could handle that many players all in one space, wait until you hear just how ambitious the action is. As rockets tear across the sky and snipers occupy tall towers, buildings crumble, dynamic weather roll ins, fires spread across forests, foliage gets displaced, and your best way of tracking someone may be by the blood dripping off of arms or the footprints your opponents leave in the mud. Players can use this technology to improvise during play, such as cutting down a massive tree with bullets to drop it on a fleeing attacker. The other players aren't the only thing you need to worry about, as wildlife is reactive. Depending on how a particular animal handles a guest in its habitat, that may tip off a player's location.

Automaton's community and PR manager Sam Hill describes Mavericks: Proving Grounds as a greatest hits of the FPS genre. "It's more about capturing the stuff that has been the hallmark of FPS over the years and has made games like Call of Duty and Battlefield great, and combining that with what we've seen from battle royale, and taking it a step further," he says. "We want to create a world where there are more thought out moments, more tactically enriched moments, where the way the map is built makes sense and doesn't just end with you hiding in a bush in a field and hoping you see the guy before he sees you."

The game can be played from either first- or third-person perspective, but each play style has its own dedicated servers; you won't have people using the third-person camera to gain an advantage by being able to look around a corner. "It's what players have come to expect from this genre," Hill says. "The game is made with both in mind. A lot of logic went into making sure it fits both."

This hybrid approach to the action unfolds across a huge play space, which Automaton says is more than 4.6 square miles. Hill describes the area as having a Scottish theme – dense in some areas with foliage and structures, and completely open in others.

After players free-fall and land onto the island via parachutes (and other ways Automaton doesn't want to go into just yet), they can find several ways to traverse the map, including a number of conventional vehicles. "We're not looking at anything particularly heavy for the vehicles," Hill adds. "They'll mostly be light vehicles for now."

The scramble to find weapons won't rely entirely on random placement. If you're a sniper and you want a rifle, you'll likely find them scattered in lookout towers or on higher points of elevation. Watching where people drop could tell you about how they approach the battle. The logic tied to item placement not only allows individual players to strategize, but also teams looking to put together a well-rounded army. "We're looking to do 100-player battle royale, and 400-player squads," Hill says. "We can confidently go past that for special events if we want to do something absolutely crazy. We can go much further. We think those will be the good numbers for queue times, and fun player density."

At a certain point in the match, the play field will constrict just like any other battle royale game, but Automaton doesn't want to reveal what the threat outside of the safe zone is. Hill says he wanted it to be a hurricane, but the development team had a better idea. Whatever it is will tie into the game's lore.

Proving Grounds is just one mode that Automaton is planning for Mavericks. In 2019, the company hopes to release a second experience falling into the MMO tactical-shooter genre. Proving Grounds will enter testing in the coming months, with a full 1.0 release planned for December. Automaton says it is currently focused just on a PC version, but is also considering bringing the experience to console later. » **Andrew Reiner**

Bless Online

Challenging MMO traditions

Seven years since its initial announcement, the massively multiplayer online RPG Bless Online is finally coming to the west. The game launched in Asian regions already to a rough critical reception, but developer Neowiz says it has learned all the lessons they need to bring the game to America and Europe.

Bless Online takes place in a fantasy world of various races, cultures, and creeds but is ultimately torn between two factions, Union and Hieron. Players create their characters and choose their allegiances, then proceed on their origin stories within the world. The MMORPG starts players in the midst of intrigue or tragedy, then opens the world to battles for the throne and ancient forests full of monsters. Between the standard trappings of dragons and knights, Bless Online stretches its legs by aiming for large scale conflicts beyond what MMORPGs have achieved before.

Bless Online was originally intended to release in the west in early 2017, but original publisher Aeria Games canceled those plans, citing a combat system that needed improvement and a lack of content. This left Neowiz to publish the MMORPG itself. The developers focused on these criticisms and resolved to improve them before launching the title in new regions.

"To be honest, we launched Bless too early," says Neowiz executive producer Sungjin Ko. "We didn't have things that we needed in the game and that became a learning experience for us."

The first thing the developers chose to focus on was reforming the combat, making it markedly different from other MMORPGs. Neowiz is breaking from the traditional auto-attack that drives most MMO combat to make every move deliberate, resulting in a more action-oriented battle system.

Players can use their traditional MMO combat skills and chain them together or use combo-like follow-ups using hotkeys to juggle, pancake, or on-the-ground pop enemies in what the game calls Stance Skills. Players can have four sets of Stance Skills mapped to the bar, allowing different combat styles for different situations.

The dodge also emphasizes things like invulnerability frames, encouraging players to be reactive with their defense mechanics. Fighting enemies stronger than your character is extremely feasible and can be done with proper skill and execution.

In addition, the western release includes a reworked progression system and new content. After its initial release, Bless Online was criticized for a lack of things to do and ramps that accelerated new players into scenarios they were not prepared to beat. Neowiz says the new content welcomes players new to the genre and gives veterans a lot more to do.

Even with these changes, releasing a new MMORPG into the western market is still a gamble, and the developer seems aware of this. Bless Online is employing a buy-to-play monetization strategy in the west, but is still cautious about the future.

"The MMO market isn't great, internationally speaking," Ko says. "When this project started, there were a lot of concerns, but I think that helped us figure how to make the best game we can. Quality MMOs will thrive, that's what we believe." » **Imran Khan**

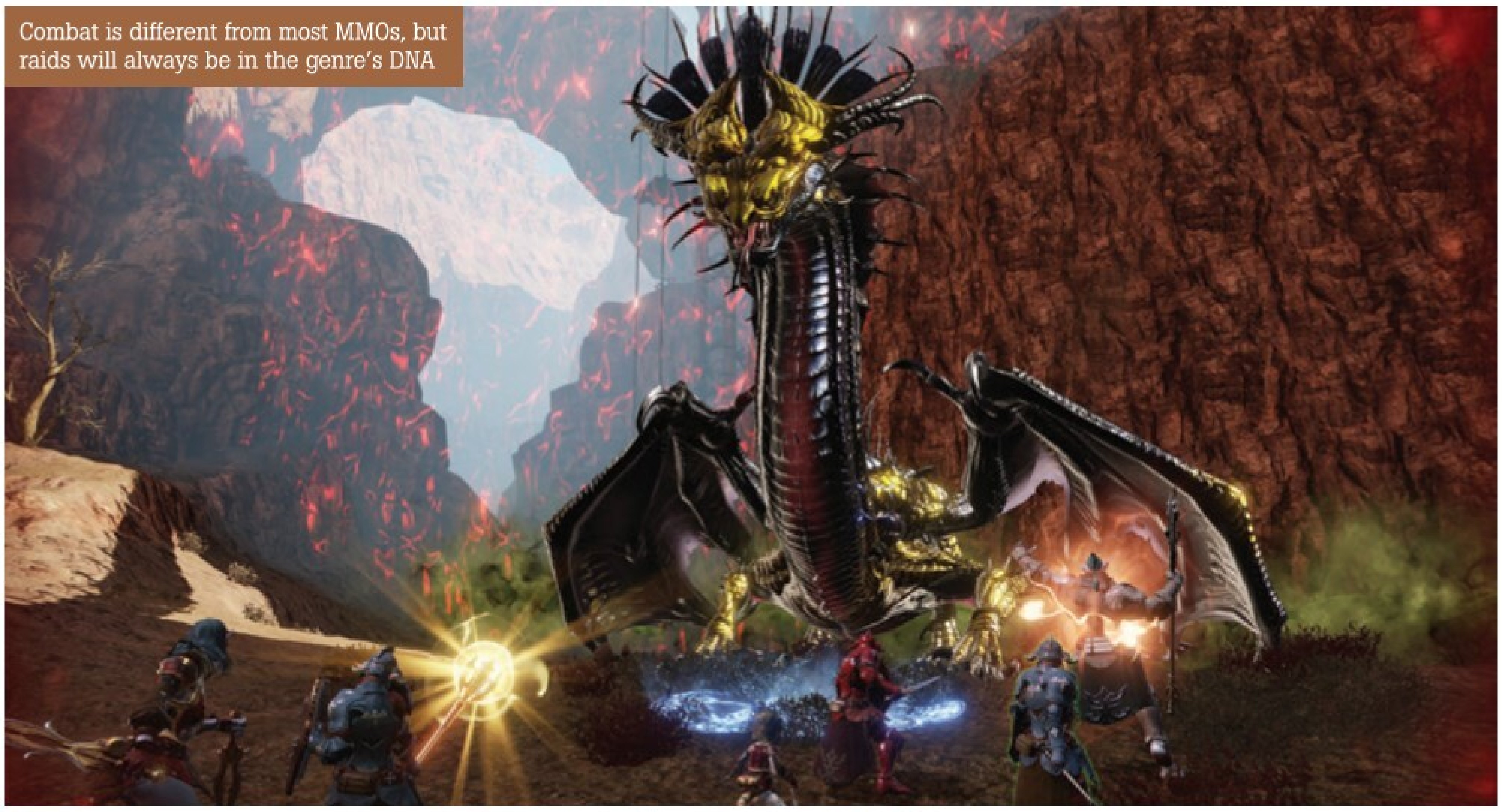
» Platform
PC

» Style
MMORPG

» Publisher
Neowiz

» Developer
Neowiz

» Release
2018



Combat is different from most MMOs, but raids will always be in the genre's DNA

Neowiz is leaning on Unreal Engine's strong particle effects to help bring the world to life

Dreams

Building your own magical experience

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Simulation

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Media Molecule

» Release
2018

Despite being one of the first titles announced for the PlayStation 4, the content-creation game Dreams went dark for an extended period. Only recently have we started seeing the game in the spotlight again. At a PlayStation event prior to E3, we had a chance to try it hands-on.

Though Dreams still follows Media Molecule's ethos of "play, create, share," this title is much more ambitious than the studio's previous work with LittleBigPlanet. In Dreams, you can create an interactive experience from the ground up, with original music, artwork, animations, and more. You can craft whatever inspires you, including but not limited to interactive art, short stories, text adventures, and platformers. At launch, it'll have PlayStation VR support, so you can even create 3D virtual-reality spaces yourself.

To begin, I customized what Media Molecule calls an "imp," which is a small cursor you can point around. They are fuzzy beings that can be customized to look differently, such as a cat, spider, or wearing glasses. By using the DualShock 4's motion sensors, you can maneuver your imp around the world to grab, interact, and possess other beings or objects. For example, I momentarily became a lightbulb, then switched to a cute bear character.

The next part of the demo showed off the short campaign, playable solo or with a friend, which is a story-driven experience called Art's Dream. It centers around Art, who is stuck in a dreamscape and attempting to find his way back to his love interest. This mode is divided into three stories with different themes (childhood fantasy, science fiction, and a noir point-and-click adventure) that eventually connect. Everything that is shown in the campaign was made with the same Dreams tools that are available to players.

"The main purpose of it is to give people something to play and also to inspire people and give them an idea of what is possible [in Dreams]," creative director Mark Healey says. Outside of the campaign, players can spend their time playing through content others have made or create something of their own.

"Whether you're playing or creating, you gather experience points," Healey says. "We track the types of things that you do. For example, if you do a lot of animating, you gain experience points as an animator."

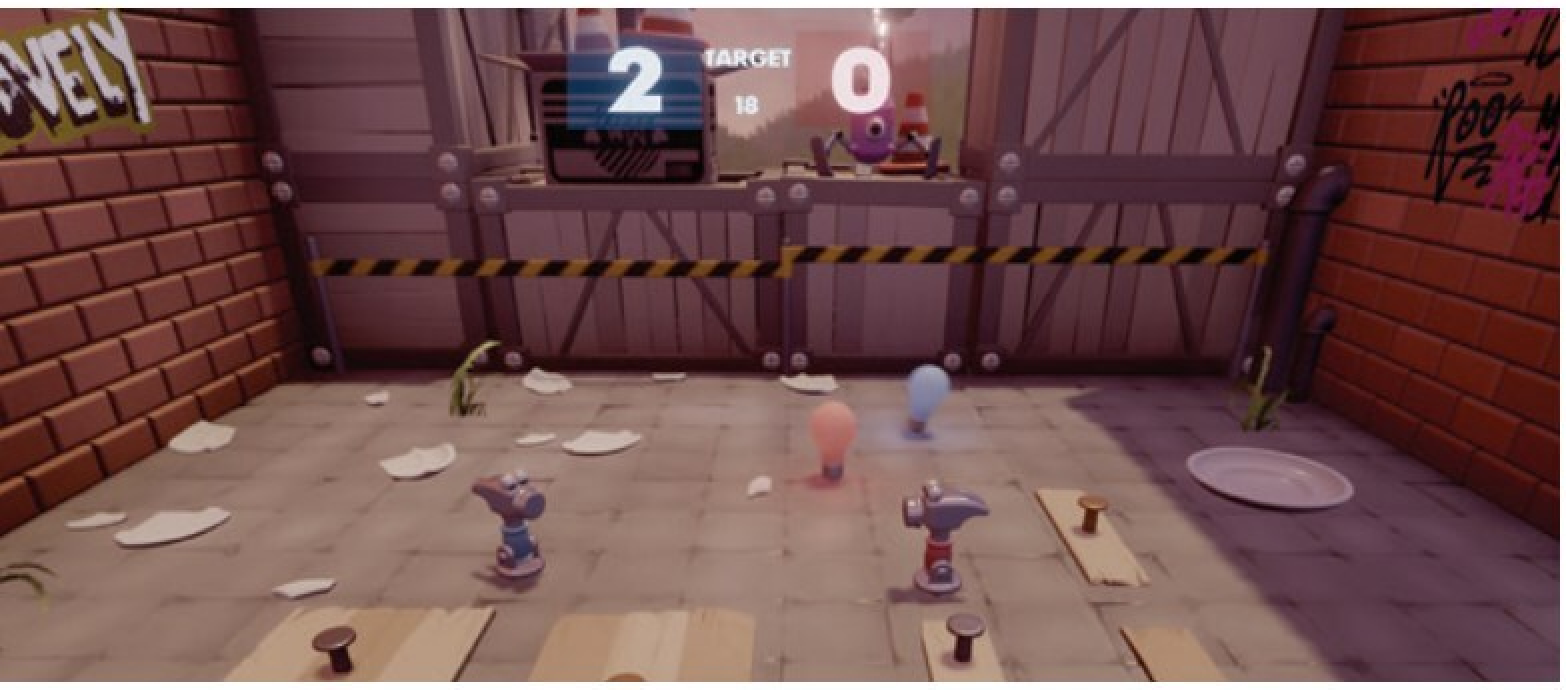
Through your profile, others can see what your expertise is, whether it is the aforementioned animating or other talents like sound designing, creating art, or storytelling. "If you want to collaborate with someone, you can easily just search and find the best animator [in Dreams]," Healey says.

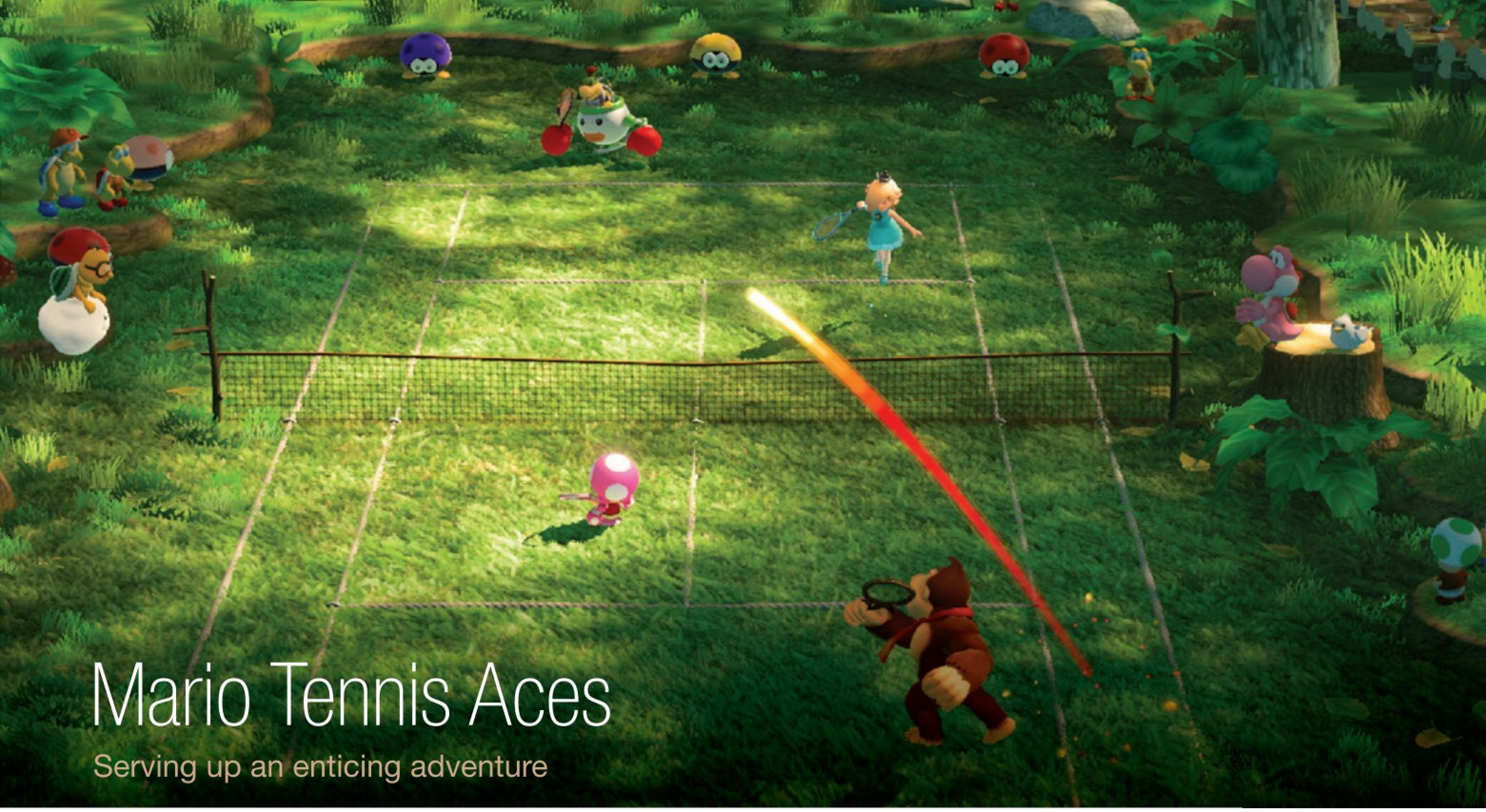
During my demo, I had a chance to fiddle with music composition by singing into the PlayStation camera's microphone, and then adding beats like percussion or bass, and sound effects. The in-game, multi-track music editor is displayed in a similar way to professional software like GarageBand, giving players a lot of control over how the final product sounds.

I was also given the tools to edit and "remix" a level to make it my own, rather than starting from scratch. Here, Media Molecule walked me through how to clone and paste items on the map, shift the landscape how I wanted, and animate sections to create moving platforms that characters can use to traverse to a floating island. You can create your own art using the motion sensors or Move controllers, too, but these controls made it difficult to be precise.

Some examples of games I saw in Dreams that can be created with these tools included a horror game where I guided a young girl through a dark forest, and a game where two hammers go against one another, trying to destroy the ground beneath their opponent. All sorts of genres or even just bits and pieces of games can be made however you wish.

Most tools are easy to grasp once you get the hang of them, which is a relief, but I wonder if PlayStation will eventually offer third-party support or the ability to integrate your own devices into the experience, such as drawing on a tablet. Nonetheless, Dreams is a brilliant creation tool with a lot of potential for creative types, and I'm looking forward to jumping in when it releases later this year. **» Elise Favis**





Mario Tennis Aces

Serving up an enticing adventure

In tennis, position is crucial. If you put yourself in the right spot to return your opponent's rally, all that's left is to maintain form and follow through with your stroke. By adding to the core gameplay and including a single-player adventure mode, Mario Tennis Aces has positioned itself to recover from the unforced error of Mario Tennis Ultra Smash. I played through the first few stages of adventure mode to get an idea of whether this iteration is a return to form.

Luigi uncovered a legendary racket with untold power, and it's bad news for the bumbling brother; Luigi, Wario, and Waluigi are possessed by the racket. Mario sets off to rescue his brother, but to do so, it only makes sense he must complete all kinds of tennis-related challenges.

Adventure mode does a good job of getting you up to speed with the basics, as well as the new shot types you can pull off. If a shot seems out of range, you can flick the right stick in that direction and your character will attempt a trick shot where they flip or lunge in that direction. It's difficult to do, but it let me return otherwise unreachable rallies.

Using your energy gauge, you can use zone speed, a time-slowing ability. If you get in position fast enough, you can pull from that same energy pool to use a zone shot where your character flies into the air and you aim exactly where you want your shot to go. Aiming away from my opponent is my first instinct, but if I hit it right at them and they don't time their stroke just right, it damages their racket. If a character's racket accrues too much damage and it breaks, they lose the match.

If you really want to stick it to your opponent, you should save your energy until it's maxed out to use a special shot. You can activate a special shot regardless of your position. After a character-specific cutscene, you aim just like the zone shot. However, their racket can immediately break and it's game over. When my opponent executed a special shot, I often opted to not take the gamble and let the ball pass.

After absorbing this knowledge, it's off to Bask Kingdom, an area that was destroyed by the legendary racket long ago. My first stop is a match against Donkey Kong. The ape is powerful, but no match for Mario's newfound shots. Each time I win, I earn experience points, which level Mario's shot speed, run speed, and agility. You also earn additional rackets that have better attack, defense, and durability attributes.

Later, I engage in a match where piranha plants line the net, swallowing any ball that comes their way and spitting it back at the player, as well as a mini game where my goal is to return balls spit by a wall of piranha plants and take out as many of them as possible. My playtime culminates in a showdown with Petey Piranha. He puts vicious spins on the ball, but with each return, I take away a little of his health. Once he's staggered, I execute a zone shot and aim for his weak point to deal damage.

Fun variations on tennis such as these often make for exciting single-player modes. While my time was focused on adventure, Mario Tennis Aces also allows for both local and online multiplayer for those who want to play with friends. When combined with the big additions to the solid core gameplay of the Mario Tennis series, I'm eager to see Aces step on the court. » **Brian Shea**

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
Camelot

» Release
June 22

The Full Roster

- Mario
- Luigi
- Wario
- Waluigi
- Peach
- Daisy
- Rosalina
- Toad
- Toadette
- Bowser
- Bowser Jr.
- Boo
- Yoshi
- Donkey Kong
- Spike
- Chain Chomp

My Hero One's Justice

U.A. high school is in session

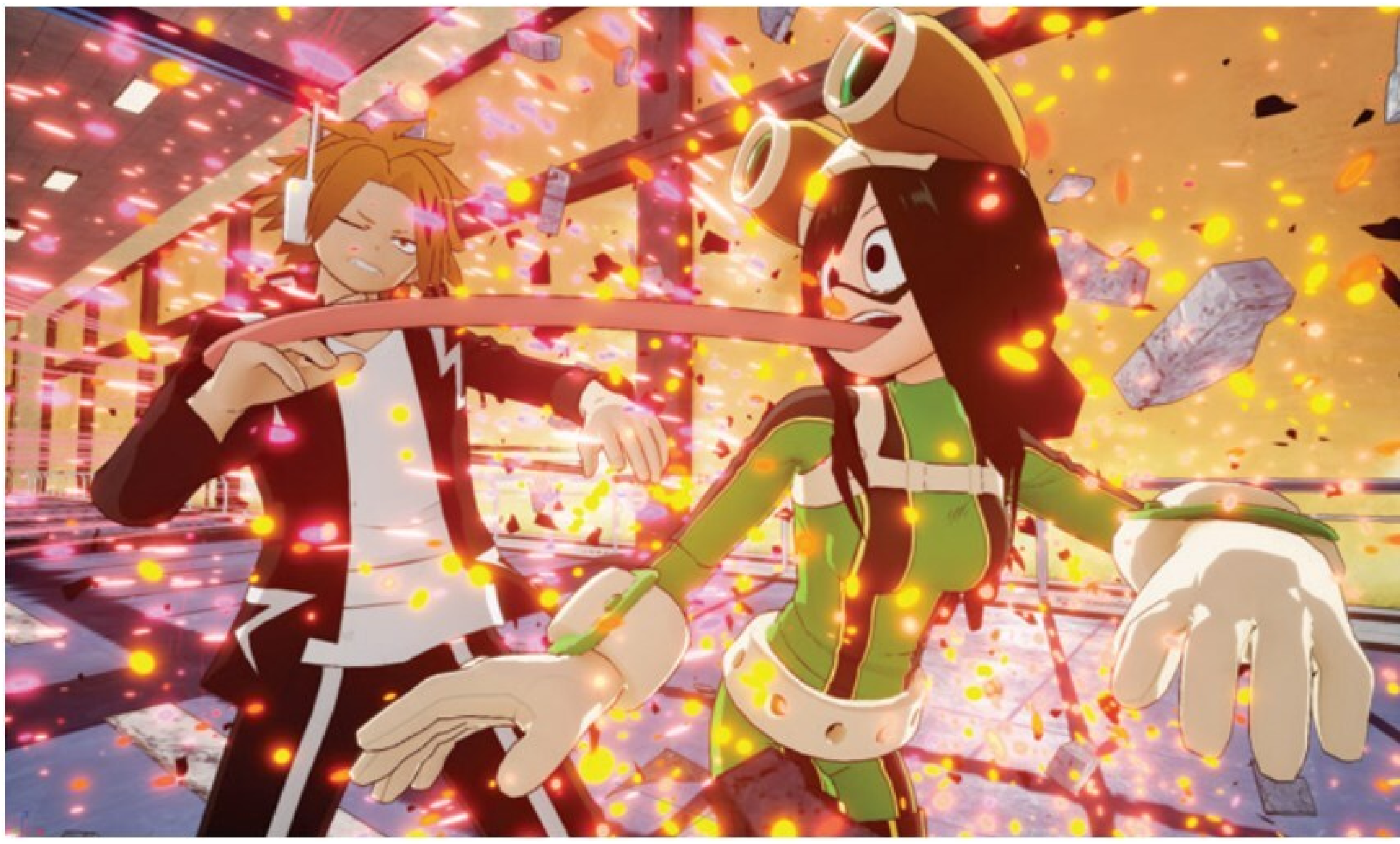
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Byking

» **Release**
2018



The *My Hero Academia* manga and anime began in 2014 and 2016 respectively, and quickly found an audience in the United States. If you aren't familiar with the franchise, the elevator pitch is that it's anime crossed with X-Men. A game adaptation for North America was inevitable, and the first one is coming this year.

Super powers are prevalent in the world of *My Hero Academia*, with a large portion of the population having distinct abilities, or "quirks." Every quirk is different, usually weird, but useful in surprising ways. The protagonist, Izuku "Deku" Midoriya, has incredible strength, but it comes at a cost. A powerful punch can break his arm, so he has to be careful about using the full extent of his abilities. One of his teachers, Shota "Eraser Head" Aizawa can temporarily delete an opponent's quirk, but only as long as Aizawa keeps his eyes open. If he blinks, they go back to full power. Those with quirks who want to use their powers for good attend U.A. High School in order to train and become heroes. In the manga and anime, the overlap and use of disparate quirks in battle creates interesting stories and combat scenarios.

For its first video game adaptation, developer Byking (known mostly for Japanese arcade games like Gunslinger Stratos that never made it stateside) hopes to capitalize on the overlap of competing combat abilities with a fighting game. Combat takes place in a 3D arena comparable to Pokkén Tournament or CyberConnect2's Naruto games. Every fighter has distinct melee abilities that take advantage of their specific quirks. Every character also has an ultimate attack centered around their quirk that deals big damage. The environments are destructible, and we've even seen combat move from the ground to vertical fisticuffs on the side of a building.

The scenarios are one versus one, but players select two other characters to use as sidekicks who can jump in for quick joint attacks. Ochaco "Uravity" Uraraka, who can make anything weightless by touching it, can touch your opponent to make them float in the air, effectively stunning them so you can unleash a powerful attack.

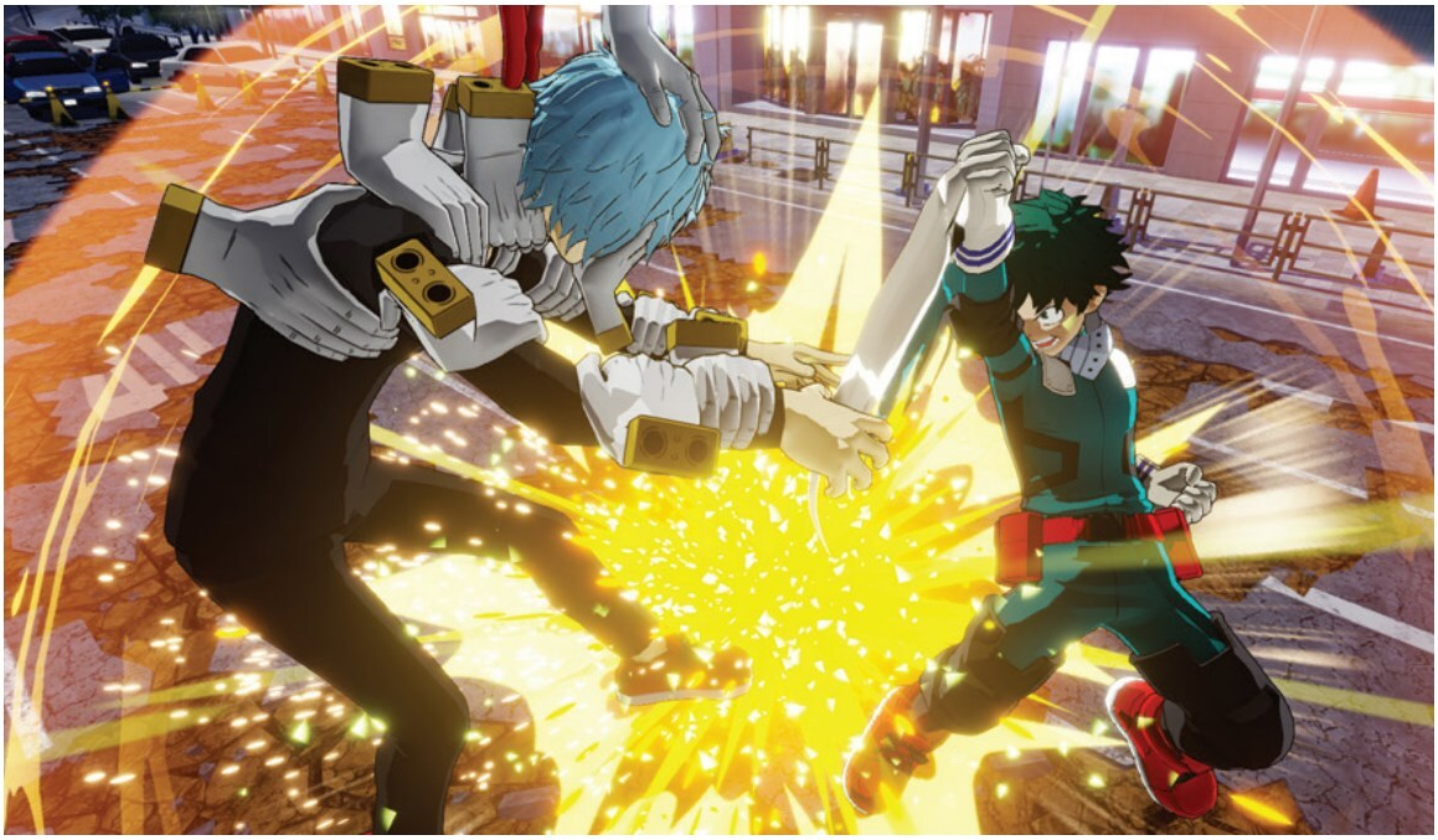
The line between hero and villain is well-defined in *My Hero Academia*, and that may extend to player and sidekick selection, as well. We haven't seen any heroes teaming up with villains for joint attacks, but that doesn't mean it won't be in the final game.

My Hero Academia is one of the most exciting anime series coming out of Japan right now, with fantastic action, great characters, and a pace that rarely takes a break. The fighting genre may not be the most exciting avenue to explore in its world, but it certainly fits with the action of the show. We're excited to step into All Might's shoes and throw out of one his signature, ultra-powerful Texas Smash attacks. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Confirmed Characters

These heroes and villains from the popular manga series join the cast of playable characters.

- Izuku "Deku" Midoriya
- Shota "Eraser Head" Aizawa
- Toshinori "All Might" Yagi
- Tomura Shigaraki
- Denki "Chargebolt" Kaminari
- Momo "Creati" Yaoyorozu
- Tsuyu "Froppy" Asui
- Shoto Todoroki
- Katsuki "Kacchan" Bakugo
- Ochaco "Uravity" Uraraka
- Tenya "Ingenium" Iida
- Chizome "Hero Killer: Stain" Akaguro



Slay The Spire

Crawling through chaos

Slay the Spire takes you into the depths of roguelike dungeon crawling to fight big bosses and find awesome loot. While that concept isn't anything new, Spire's approach to the classic crawl is built as a deckbuilding card game. Complete a run and you unlock new difficulty modes to add to the challenge. Fail and you're back to square one – though you may unlock some new cards or artifacts that could appear in future runs. The dungeons are randomized each time, though there are some spawning rules that give you a framework to become familiar with to glean an edge.

Each of the three core characters plays completely different, so even if you've mastered the strength-boosting sword-swinging of the Ironclad, it takes another mindset altogether to step into the shoes of the poison-flinging Silent or the orb-evoking Defect. Each class has its own special cards and artifacts, and you never know exactly what each run holds. Building your deck from scratch each time allows you to experience a variety of strategies with each character as you go, whether your goal is to distill your deck down to a few potent cards or to pile a deck high to take advantage of cards that reward you for having a deep well.

The journey isn't all card-slinging combat, either. Many map tiles can hold treasure, shops, or unknown encounters with any number of denizens, friend or foe. You might spin a wheel for an unknown prize, bet on the winner of a duel, make a bargain with an unsavory character, or pick up a debilitating curse. These choices add another layer to the game that makes exploration interesting even when you're not slaughtering monsters.

Slay the Spire is in early access, but it's already an impressive title. Updates are frequent, and I can't wait to explore the final version when it launches.

» **Daniel Tack**

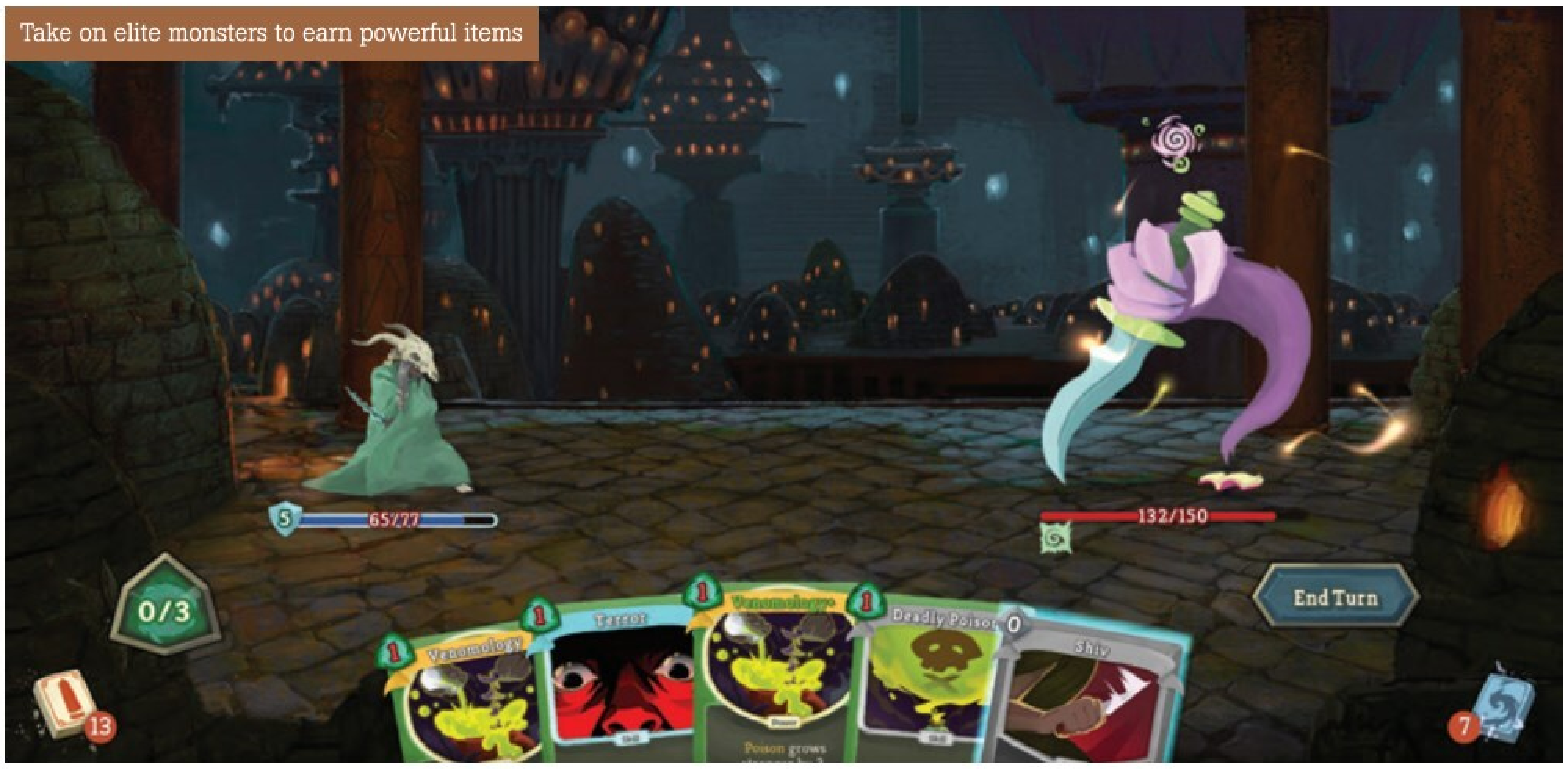
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
MegaCrit

» **Developer**
MegaCrit

» **Release**
TBA


Take on elite monsters to earn powerful items

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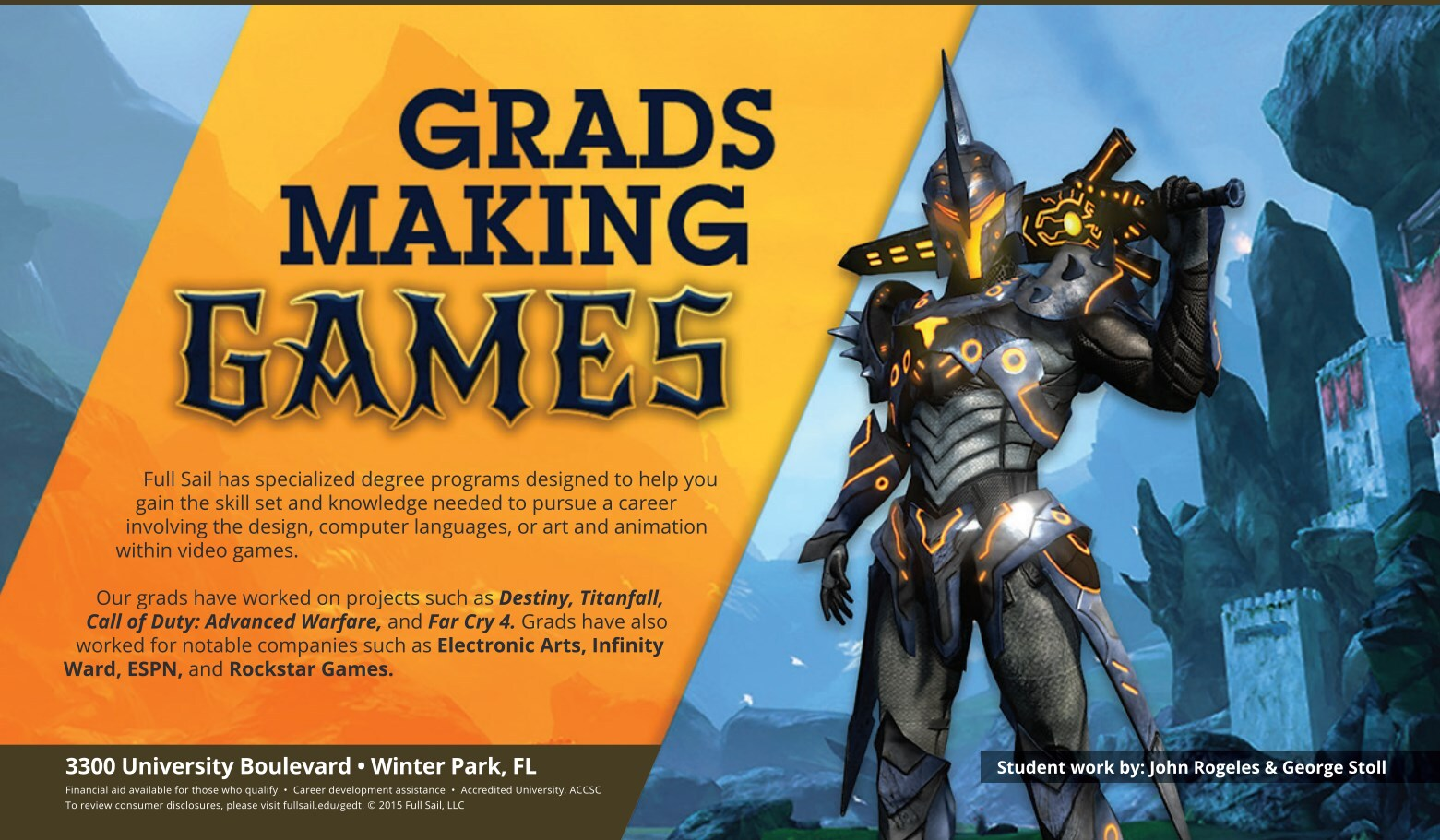

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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll

Kingdom Hearts III

More battle options with plenty of Disney delights

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Square Enix

» Release
2018

If you've been waiting for the third entry in Square Enix's popular Disney-infused series, the long lead-up has been agonizing. The second entry hit over a decade ago, with several spinoffs and HD remasters following. Information about the long-awaited conclusion to the Xehanort arc has slowly trickled out since the game was officially announced at E3 five years ago. With a release window set for some time this year, Square Enix finally let the game come out of hiding for its first hands-on opportunity. Yes, it exists, and Square Enix is going all out, packing in as much bombastic action and Disney wonder as possible.

In Kingdom Hearts III, everything is bigger, with more detailed environments and a speedier feel. Think of it as a cross between Dream Drop Distance and Kingdom Hearts 0.2 Birth by Sleep – A Fragmentary Passage, which provided more options for spectacular combos by allowing you to leverage the environment around you, such as grinding rails and swinging up poles. Expect a flashier and more complex experience than past entries; this is thanks to the mix of keyblade transformations, attractions, and links. I see this first-hand when I take on a boss battle against a titan at Olympus Coliseum, and later when I visit Andy's Room from *Toy Story* alongside the newly designed locale for the world called Galaxy Toys.

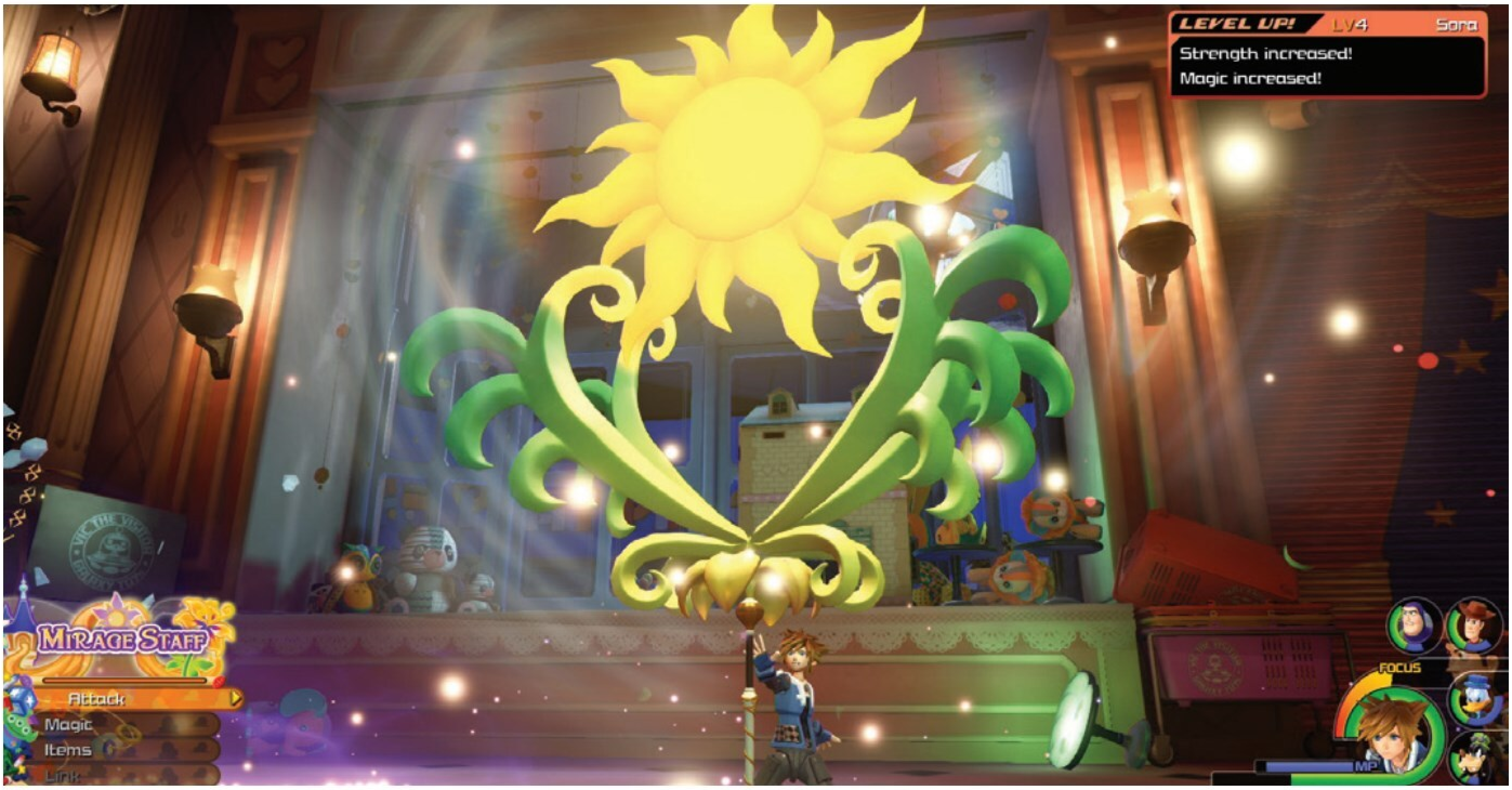
Movement is much more fluid, and the increased verticality for this entry really shows. Sora can run up walls in a jiffy, and in one sequence must consider his speed and placement as a titan throws huge boulders to deter his progress as he climbs up the side of a collapsing mountain. Just be prepared for the poor camera that's perpetually plagued the series. Using the lock-on button is to your advantage to get some semblance of your placement and increase your chance of landing attacks.

Keyblade transformations, which can turn Sora's keyblade into a massive drill, double yo-yos, and much more are an exciting new feature that we've seen in trailers. Getting hands-on time only made their importance more apparent, and I can't express enough how cool it is not only to see each keyblade's wild variations, but also how it adds variety to combat. Some transformations are speedier and require fast attacks, while others are slower and more calculated. Early keyblades only have two transformations, but later in the game you get three, and it feels like you're activating them often.

Transformations happen once you chain together enough combos. Because the titan boss is early in the game, I'm only unlocking special skills such as "Second Form," which issues a stun impact, and "Goofy Shot," which allows you to spin the beloved party member around and fling him at the enemy. You can swap between keyblades at any time to vary up the special attacks available to you. Later in the game, I see more complex transformations with Toy Story's Infinity keyblade, which lets you swing a lumbering hammer with power like Thor and control an unwieldy rocket, crashing into baddies for maximum impact.

Attractions are only available at certain points and are triggered by building up combos. Once activated by pressing a button when the prompt appears on screen, you get to do basic attacks with the attraction, before pulling off a big finisher. Riffs on popular Disney attractions were on display in the demo, such as Big Magic Mountain and the Mad Tea Cups. The former has Sora riding on a train, landing regular attacks before lining up a charged-up shot to target a specific area for a powerful finisher. The Mad Tea Cups is as fun as you'd expect it to be, letting you control your cup's direction as it spins rapidly around to knock into baddies.

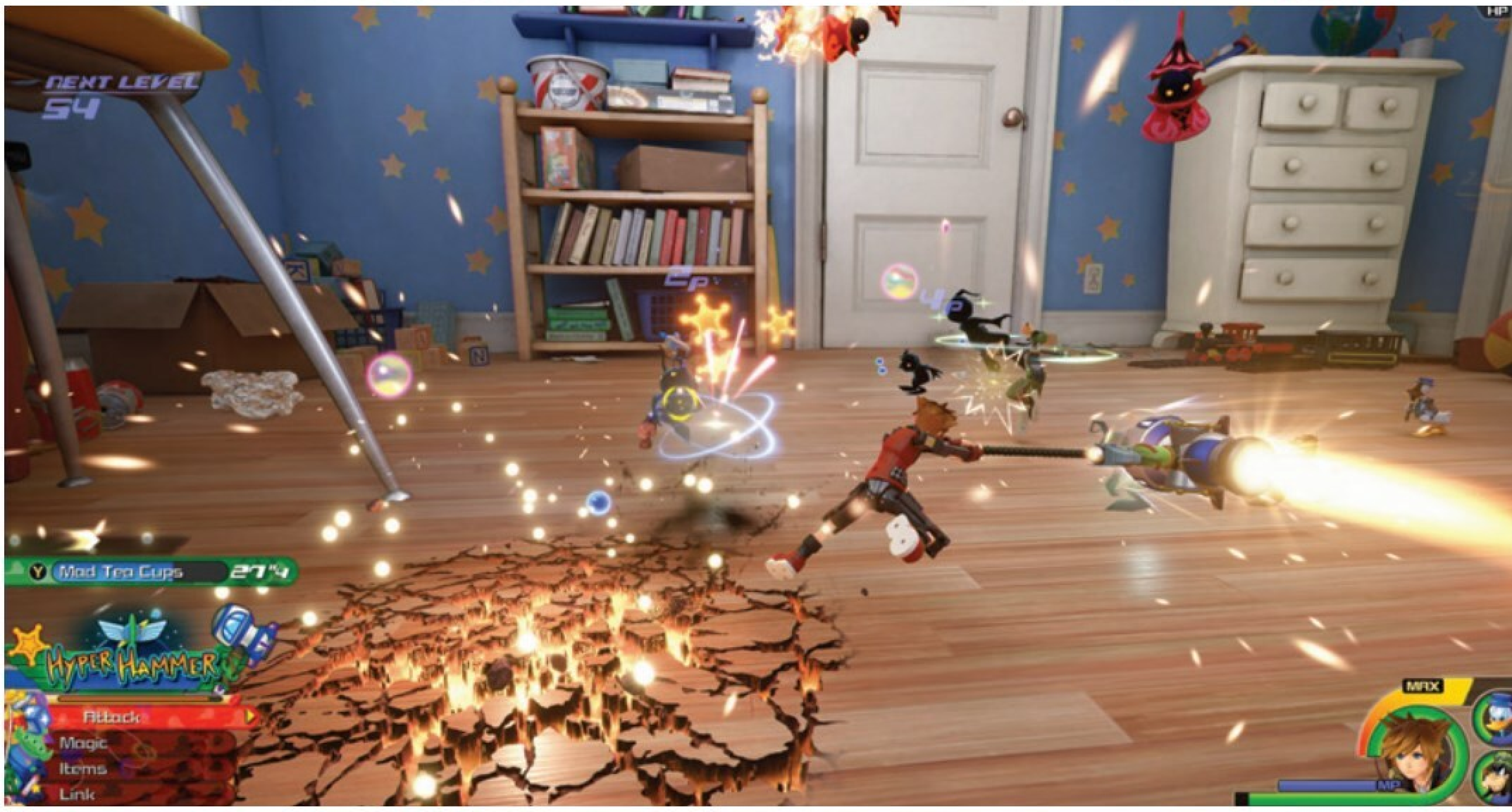
That's hardly the only option available

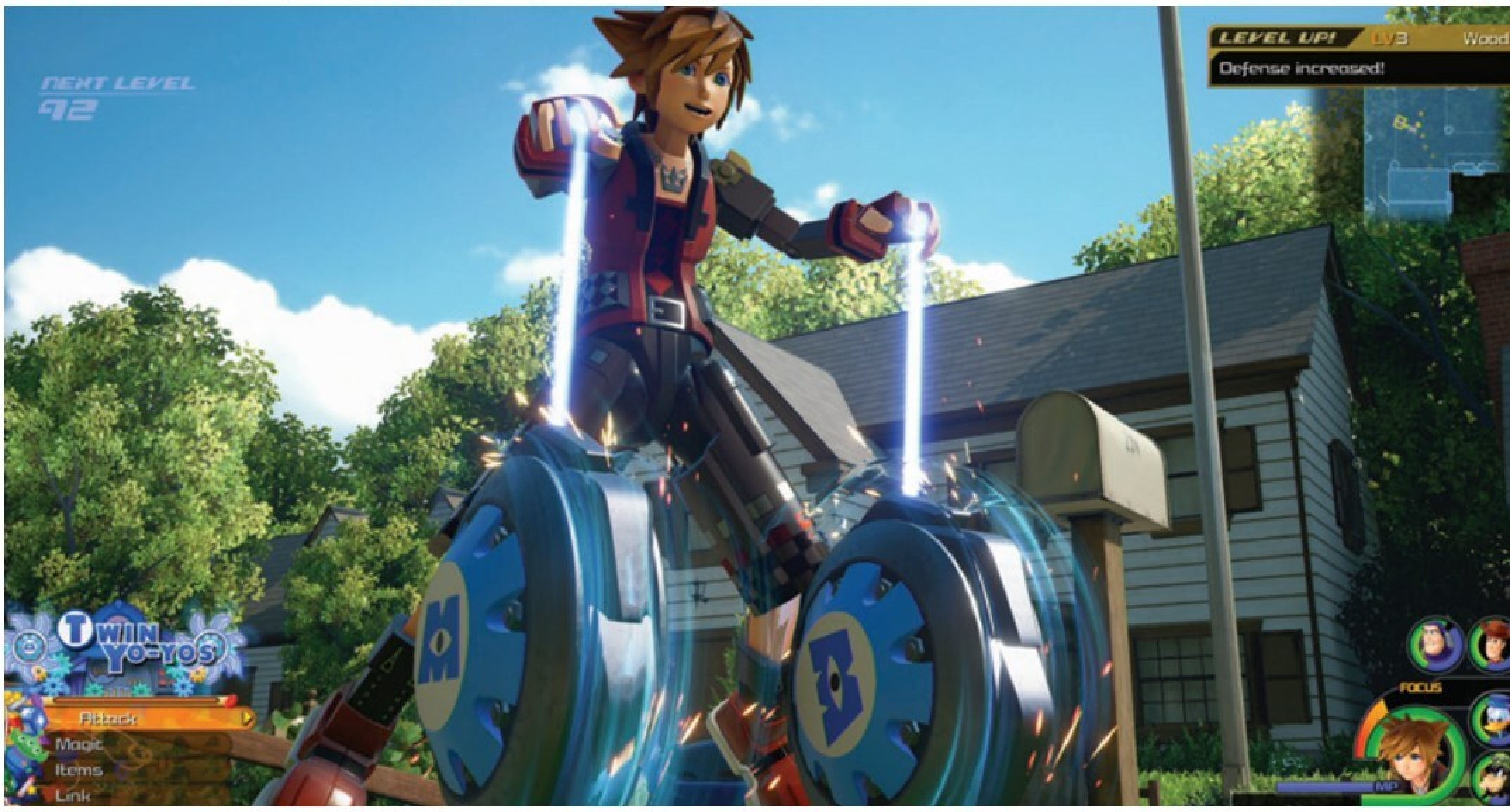

LEVEL UP! LV4 Sora
Strength increased!
Magic increased!

in battle. Links have now taken the place of summons, which operate similarly, and can be activated by using the d-pad. Two of the big-name links are Wreck-It Ralph and The Little Mermaid's Ariel. Wreck-It Ralph's 8-Bit Blast link lets you rush and jump to topple over enemies, similar to a gorilla. Ralph can also build; the more blocks he creates, the higher the damage he deals as he knocks them into the enemy. Ariel's Lagoon Showtime lets her dive and throw enemies into the air, and then you can attack them using the splash command. Her finisher is a beautiful sequence where she teams up with Sora for a fountain attack.

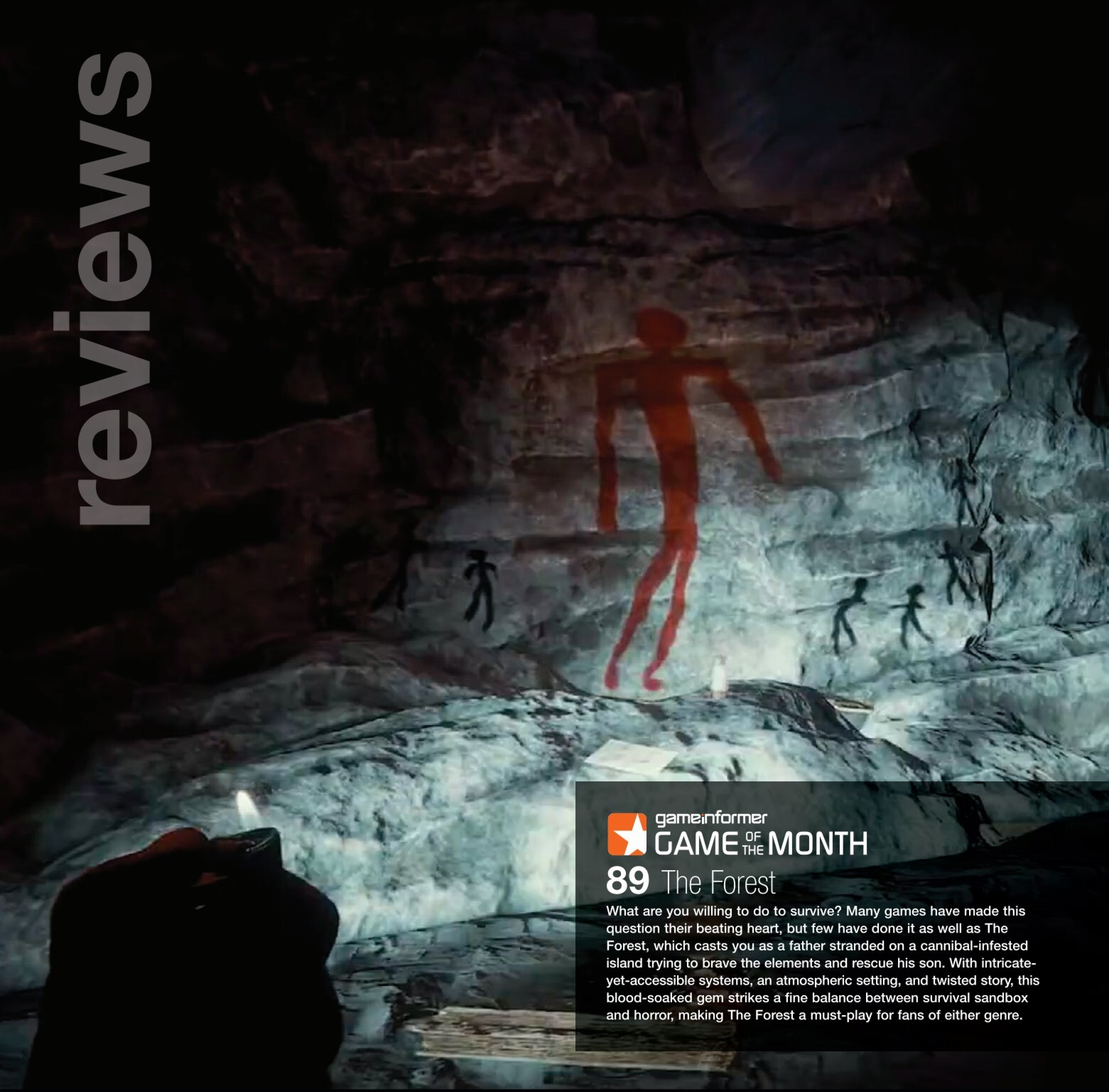
As you can see, the combat has evolved and it's a lot to take in. Throw in extra bonuses for different worlds, like Gigas (mechs) you can control in Galaxy Toys, and you're constantly on your toes. I loved having so many options at my disposal and smiled every time a new transformation, attraction, or link showed up. However, sometimes keeping track of all these elements and activating them accordingly has you watching your action commands more than what's happening in front of you. It certainly takes some adjustment time, and it will be interesting to see how many actual transformations, attractions, and links are in the final game.

So far, Kingdom Hearts III looks to be the lighthearted fun the series has been known for. Just like a trip to Disneyland, it brings out the kid in you again, and this time it's grander and more exuberant. Hopefully, after the long wait, it can live up to expectations. » **Kimberley Wallace**




LEVEL UP! LV3 Wood
Defense increased!

reviews



gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

89 The Forest

What are you willing to do to survive? Many games have made this question their beating heart, but few have done it as well as The Forest, which casts you as a father stranded on a cannibal-infested island trying to brave the elements and rescue his son. With intricate-yet-accessible systems, an atmospheric setting, and twisted story, this blood-soaked gem strikes a fine balance between survival sandbox and horror, making The Forest a must-play for fans of either genre.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	The number of people who want a new Leisure Suit Larry game.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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State Of Decay 2

A plague on multiple fronts

6.5

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Undead Labs **Release** May 22 **Rating** M

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Tap into your inner survivalist and see if you can keep a community alive through a zombie infestation – alone or with friends

» **Graphics**
Some moments border on beauty, and then a zombie slouches into view and kills the mood. Even the Xbox One X has a hard time maintaining a steady framerate

» **Sound**
A sparse soundtrack helps magnify the tension while also offering a break from the amateurish voice acting

» **Playability**
The systems run deep, and Undead Labs still struggles to adequately communicate how to get the most out of its game

» **Entertainment**
State of Decay 2 has a lot to love, but it's overwhelmed by legacy issues and a slew of all-new ones that came along for the co-op ride

» **Replay Value**
High

When making a sequel, most studios make it a priority to build on the strengths of the original while patching up weaknesses. State of Decay 2 gets the first part right. Five years after the first game clawed its way to cult-favorite status, Undead Labs has released a follow-up that offers incremental improvements over its predecessor – and co-op – but the sense that this game isn't ready for wide release is as tough to shake as a feral zombie.

At the beginning, your small group of survivors is homeless, and their truck is out of gas. Fortunately, safety is within walking distance. Setting up a new base of operations is simple, after you've cleared your dilapidated starter home of zombies. The tricky part comes with making sure that the fledgling community is safe and happy. Regardless of which of the three maps you choose to start in, you begin your journey in a small split-level. Its size requires a number of tough trade-offs. Should you build an infirmary to nurse your characters back to health when they're inevitably injured in the field? Or would that space be better used by building a watchtower to provide additional security? There aren't many wrong answers, and I enjoyed trying to make the most from those limited resources.

There may not be many wrong answers, but some are less wrong than others. Players who forego an infirmary are in for a rude awakening, thanks to the introduction of a new strain of zombie. These variants are infected with something called the blood plague, and they're more than happy to share. If you get munched on too many times by these tougher foes, your characters run the risk of getting infected as well. Dally too long on administering a cure, and you have to say goodbye to the infected character – either through exile or euthanasia. Getting a cure is easier said than done, particularly during the early stages of the game. Some infected zombies drop plague samples, which can be used in your medical station to create vials of curative.

These new zombies add a welcome wrinkle to world exploration, which is largely the same as before. On its surface, the focus on supply runs and fetch quests might seem overly repetitive. Thankfully, Undead Labs has created a systemic world that's deadly and reactive enough to remain interesting. Most of my sessions included at least a few "hell yeah!" escapes, where I was barely able to limp back to camp or pull my smoking car into the lot with a horde in hot pursuit. The thrill is certainly magnified by the game's permadeath elements, where a favorite hero can easily die if they're fatigued, injured, or a victim of poor planning. New randomly generated characters are always available to fill up those empty beds, but it doesn't make the loss of a favorite character sting any less – not necessarily for their personalities, but the time and effort spent leveling them up.

You can take an A.I. companion along with you, but if you're clamoring for companionship you're better served bringing an actual friend or three. One player is the host, and the others can lend a hand in battle and in keeping the host's supply full. It's fine, but it seems at odds with the overall emphasis on being a permanent part of a community; you're definitely a guest in someone else's world. Playing with friends makes some of the tougher tasks, such as destroying nest-like plague hearts, fairly trivial. Supply runs are also faster and more lucrative, since the A.I. refuses to pitch in when it's time to loot. I loved the idea of having my friends come along for the ride, but Undead Labs clearly struggled with the co-op implementation in some frustrating ways.

I ran into a steady drip of bugs and glitches during my solo experience. Some were funny, like watching zombies fall into the world while driving quickly on the roads (roads that, State of Decay veterans should know, now aren't frequently littered with impassible blockades). Animations unfurl in goofy and unexpected ways. Others were less hilarious, like when items vanished or companions teleported back to base without any provocation. Those issues are magnified in co-op. Characters skitter around each other, barely able to keep up with their friends. Flashlights are basically broken. Cars disappear or warp onto their sides before bursting into flame. Zombies materialize within arm's reach, and start chowing down on your character before you have time to react. I won't recite the litany of problems; you'll see plenty if you spend a few minutes playing the game.

Individually, these issues sound silly, and some players might relish in its masochistic "so bad it's good" delights. I can't do that. This is a game where you can realistically lose a character you've spent hours honing through no fault of your own. I appreciate the tension that permadeath brings, and how it leads to an investment in the characters that I wouldn't otherwise have. But State of Decay 2 doesn't play fair. It's unpolished and sloppy, and you're at risk of losing progress, failing missions, and having to say goodbye to one of your heroes because the game was pushed out of the nest too early. The fact that this was the main complaint players had with the first State of Decay and its subsequent remaster makes it all the more inexcusable.

That's a shame, because State of Decay 2 has so much to love. If you manage to level a character high enough, you can promote them to a leadership role. Depending on their dominant trait, your group can focus on trade, construction, maintaining order, and acquiring power through force. It's a simple, but effective way to tailor your group's goals beyond mere survival. The narrative is a bare-bones affair, which makes it easy for your imagination to fill in the gaps, and it works well. See it through to its conclusion, and you can bring a trio of survivors along to build an all-new community, with unlockable end-game perks that let you save precious time in subsequent attempts. After seeing my first group's story to the end, I wanted to see what came next for my survivors, who worked to bring peace and cooperation to the land. But I'm not going to, or at least not any time soon. It's not worth the aggravation in its current state. » **Jeff Cork**

Dark Souls Remastered

Gently modifying a masterpiece

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action (6-Player Online) **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** From Software **Release** May 25 **Rating** M

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Bring the classic title that brought a sub-genre of challenging dark fantasy to the spotlight back with quality of life improvements

» Graphics
The seven-year-old title feels its age in this department, though the steady 60 frames per second is a significant boon

» Sound
Sparse use of music and traditional fantasy sounds accentuate the gloomy atmosphere

» Playability
The carefully measured combat of Dark Souls can be daunting at first, but with some effort anyone can take the journey

» Entertainment
A rock-solid framerate makes this the definitive choice for playing Dark Souls on console today

» Replay Value
Moderate

Seven years later, the influence of From Software's Dark Souls on the games industry is impossible to ignore. A challenging atmospheric experience through classic fantasy tropes with a grim tint, Dark Souls spurred an entire genre of souls-like titles, and provided a haven for those who love exploration, larger-than-life boss battles, and a world drenched with mystery. Dark Souls Remastered is the way to play the game today if you're on console, though PC players may have experienced many of the same improvements via Durante's legendary DSFix mod.

The most important part of the remaster is the upgrade to 60 frames per second. Even areas that were notorious for chugging like Blighttown run smooth the whole way through (although the zone is still an abomination of toxic poison, ogres, and rickety ladders). Everything looks crisp and clean, and you won't slow down at an inopportune moment when you're jamming your zweihander into a disgusting monstrosity's flesh. For those that experienced the original title on console, these changes alone make the remaster worth the price of admission.

In addition, Dark Souls Remastered brings other aspects of the game up to speed with its modern counterparts like Dark Souls III. You can remap your buttons for a control scheme that suits your playstyle, use multiple items at the same time instead of having to laboriously consume each little bundle of souls, and change your covenants at bonfires. Even playing with your friends is easier than ever thanks to the implementation of a password system. These minor changes are nice additions, and don't fundamentally alter anything from the core title.

For those new to the series, you can expect a captivating crawl through a mesmerizing dark world, full of unforgiving encounters, majestic foes, spectacular loot, and beautiful environments. The degree of openness in Dark Souls can lead you venturing into dangerous areas early on, so don't get dismayed if you suddenly find yourself up against something impossible – instead, perhaps look for another route. The interconnected, shortcut-laden world that wraps around the Firelink Shrine is something wonderful, once you have your bearings.

All improvements aside, Dark Souls does feel its age in the face of From Software's recent contributions to the genre. The drop off in quality in the second half of the game, with bosses like Bed of Chaos and incomprehensible zones like Lost Izalith, remain curious blemishes on an otherwise incredible experience. » **Daniel Tack**

This review pertains to the PS4 version of Dark Souls Remastered. The game is also available on Xbox One and PC. A Switch version is scheduled for a summer release

Laser League

The future is being vaporized by a laser

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Navigate an ever-changing playing field as you try to activate deadly lasers and stay alive in this fast-paced title

» **Graphics**
The game's clean look isn't just about style, it also helps players clearly understand what's going on

» **Sound**
Audible callouts for powerups and when your class abilities are charged and ready to go are very helpful when your mind is otherwise busy trying to stay alive

» **Playability**
There were a few times when I questioned the game's collision detection between my player and a laser, but movement feels smooth

» **Entertainment**
The arena and its deadly lasers may be ever-changing, but the game's rapid-fire fun is constant

» **Replay Value**
High

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 to 8-Player Action (6-Player Online) **Publisher** 505 Games **Developer** Roll7 **Release** May 10 **Rating** E10+

Don't believe the visions of a dystopian future – 2150 is going to be a blast. I can't tell you the state of the human race or even if we're still on this Earth, but if the sport in Laser League is around, the bread and circuses will be rich. You may be vaporized by a sweeping laser field or shoved into one by an opponent, but with quick thinking, twitch skills, and strategy, living in a state of constant near-death is more than just feeling alive, it's exhilarating.

Laser League is a sport in the future where two teams of up to four players win by surviving multiple rounds in an arena of deadly lasers. These lasers emit from moving, rotating nodes that activate according to whichever team touches them first. Touch a laser field of the other team and you die. Thus, the playing field is like a bullet-hell shooter with discernible patterns and often little room for error. Running around activating and reactivating nodes (new ones drop and old ones switch off) or reviving teammates is fun as the balance of power often shifts from team to team within a round. But avoiding lasers is just the beginning of Laser League's addictive gameplay.

Automatically dropped power-ups change the simple premise by switching all your lasers over to your opponent, speeding up the nodes, stunning the other players, etc. Power-ups and the everchanging landscape give you more to react to, but don't make the game more complex, per se. The game layers on clear strategic avenues, not cumbersome, superfluous baggage, allowing players to always remain nimble in mind and movement.

Laser League also works well because it's well balanced. The six player classes have their own abilities on cooldown, and each one has their time and place. I've won matches with different loadouts of classes, and even when a power-up drops, it doesn't mean it's going to instantly change the tide or even that the smart thing is to pick it up immediately. And when you're down, you're never really out. You can rely on your stick skills to maneuver your way to safety, or activate new nodes to put your opponent on the defensive.

This balance makes the multiplayer less intimidating while still retaining its competitive spirit. The game has a single-player experience which lets you mix-and-match up to eight local players, but it's a training ground not a campaign by any stretch of the imagination. Here A.I. bots can be used if you don't have enough real bodies, and the A.I. is competent, going about its job utilizing whatever class you've set up for it and reviving fallen players. If there's a shallow point of the game, it's that while the class abilities cater to different play styles, the classes don't have deep progression, limiting players' rewards to cosmetic customization options.

I was occasionally killed by a laser I swear I wasn't touching, but for the most part the gameplay delivers with necessary precision. Movement is tight and responsive, allowing you to stop and turn fluidly on a dime when a laser threatens to shave off your face. I also had lag-free sessions with players way over in Europe. This helps the aforementioned balance, because while the dash attacks of the Blade and Smash classes are powerful, if those classes don't line up their attacks precisely or you dodge out of the way, they'll end up eating empty air or unintentionally vaporizing themselves into a laser like you planned it all along.

While the game comes with 16 varied maps in four venues, its multiplayer structure doesn't give players enough options now at launch. The game offers no lobbies or playlists where you can play a particular map or sequence of maps. Instead, it's rotated by the developer. Similarly, you can't tweak parameters such as the frequency at which power-ups appear or even how many points are in a round or how many rounds comprise a match. There is no persistence to your team, not even a team leaderboard. The lack of options doesn't make the game less fun, but having more choice would prevent you from having to play the same map twice in a row, for instance.

As I played Laser League people walked by my desk, saw the vibrant colors and figures scurrying around, and told me they had no idea what was going on. Play the game for just five minutes, however, and its addictive frenzy will become readily apparent. The future is dangerous, chaotic, and unpredictable, but it's full of exciting possibilities. » **Matthew Kato**

Super Mega Baseball 2

A rock-solid single

Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Metalhead Software **Developer** Metalhead Software **Release** May 1 **Rating** E

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

My first baseman is named Grunt Manly. Most of my pitchers itch their butts before throwing the ball. My team, the Herbisaurs, is taking on the Sirloins. Super Mega Baseball 2 doesn't take itself too seriously, but that doesn't mean you'll see moonshot home runs or pitches corkscrewing comically to the plate. Despite the goofy setup, developer Metalhead Software delivers a surprisingly authentic baseball simulation that is both competitive and fun.

If you played the 2014 series debut of Super Mega Baseball, and the updated version Super Mega Baseball: Extra Innings, which released a year later, the series is slowly inching closer to realism. The player models, while still looking like they were yanked out of a children's CG movie, no longer have overly expressive cartoon eyes, and their physiques lose the bobble head qualities to look more appropriately human. The bats they wield are also slimmed down from the wide size often used by toddlers to smack wiffle balls.

The improved player models showcase nice animation touches like waggles in the batter's box, and stretching to catch a ball for a bang-bang play at first, but are still a bit stiff and slow when fielding fly balls and grounders – meaning they won't get to everything you think they should. Even with a few balls squeaking by for questionable hits, the balance of play is spot on, usually delivering the number of hits, runs, and scoring opportunities you'd see in an MLB game.

The balance stems from the beautifully designed pitching and batting mechanics, which allow players to work the plate and hopefully induce desired outcomes, like pitching outside to make a pull hitter nub a weak grounder. The pitching in particular feels fantastic, relying on timing-based reflexes to accurately paint corners of the plate. After selecting a desired pitch location, you must quickly move a reticle onto that spot before the ball leaves the pitcher's hand. The closer you are, the more likely the pitch will hit that spot. If you want to put a little extra mustard on the pitch, the execution window is even shorter, meaning you may catch too much of the plate, but if you are successful, it's harder to hit.

Batting also incorporates a risk/reward timing based skill that pushes you to charge a swing and fill a meter as much as possible at the point of contact. Accomplishing this can be tricky as pitchers have different deliveries and pitches fly at different speeds. There's some guesswork involved, but you don't always have to charge the swing; standard contact is performed by simply tapping the button. Extra skill comes from angling the swing with a cursor.

Fielding is the weakest part of the experience. Most of it is handled by the computer, but you can always take control to do it yourself, which is ill-advised, as the only way to read a ball's trajectory is by its shadow. Even with the computer handling the basic flyballs and grounders, the player does have to initiate throws and jump or dive for balls, the latter of which is used more often than you would think, and ends up being quite fun in terms of spectacle and nailing the timing. If you aren't on with your timing, a throw could sail past the fielder, or your dive may result in the ball hitting your body instead of the glove. Again, there's some fun to it, but I wish I had more of a hand in it. Base running is mostly solid, although A.I. players don't always tag up on deep fly balls.

Super Mega Baseball doesn't offer many avenues of play. You won't find Franchise mode, Home Run derby, drafts, or much in terms of depth anywhere. The big modes are Season, which can be adjusted from a full schedule down to just 16 games, and Pennant Race, an online mode that pushes you to win as many games as possible over a set amount of time. Given how fast games go thanks to the computer being eager to swing at almost everything, a short Season can be completed in an afternoon, and most of my Pennant Race games proved to be nail-biters. Both modes deliver plenty of thrills that bring out the best of the sport.

Super Mega Baseball 2 may not have the MLB or MLBPA licenses, but it does offer robust team and player customization. If you take the time, you can recreate the MLB rosters and team colors, but it will take a skilled artist to make the logos, which can be edited and include artwork layers. Metalhead clearly knew people would do this, and even allowed for the conferences and divisions to be altered. Up to 32 teams can be customized for a league. As of now, there isn't a way to download player-made rosters or teams.

As your skill level increases, you'll find you may need to bump up the difficulty, and thankfully that doesn't mean a jump from normal to hard. Metalhead devised a slick skill-based system called Ego, which allows the player to tick up the difficulty for batting, pitching, base running, and fielding.

Super Mega Baseball 2 delivers a rock-solid baseball experience that may come up light on modes, but hones in on the fun and skill of pitching and batting. I hope this becomes an annualized series, as Metalhead has a great foundation to build upon. » **Andrew Reiner**

» Concept
Ignore the cartoon look. Super Mega Baseball 2 is an authentic baseball simulation with excellent skill-based gameplay

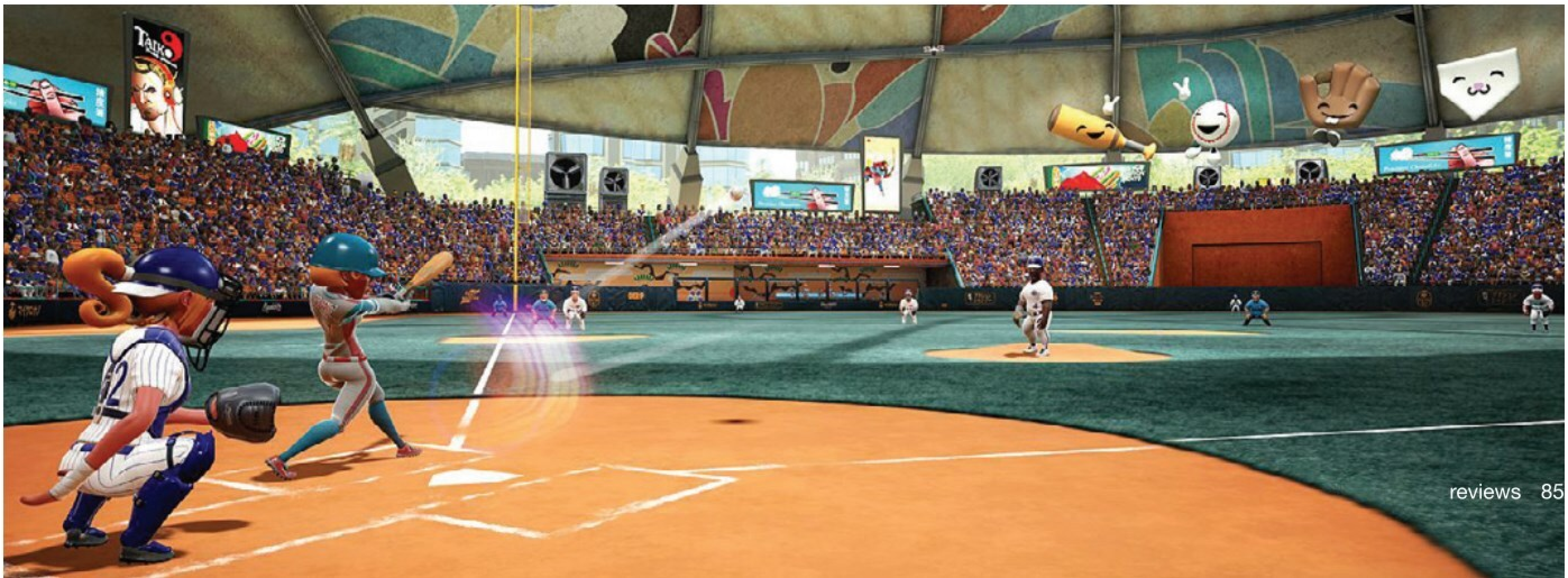
» Graphics
Player models are more detailed than in previous iterations, but are still a bit stiff in animation

» Sound
The lack of commentary is filled by a nice array of stadium sounds – from the organ to the crowd reacting accordingly

» Playability
The timing-based pitching and batting capture the small nuances of the sport. Fielding is sadly mostly automated, but does demand player input for exciting moments

» Entertainment
Don't let the lack of modes turn you away. Super Mega Baseball 2 nails the fundamentals of the sport

» Replay Value
Moderately high



Destiny 2: Warmind

A promising trajectory

7.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Confront the Hive and a resurgent A.I. amid the polar ice caps of Mars, and power up your Guardian through an especially grueling grind

» Graphics
While the bad guys feel recycled, the environment art, character, armor, and weapon designs remain top notch

» Sound
At this point, it's almost a given that new Destiny content will bring with it a stellar orchestral score – but it's no less worth noting and appreciating

» Playability
Refocused attention on the hobbyist player is welcome, but the means of progress and investment are likely to be opaque to more casual fans, even as the gunplay remains the industry leader

» Entertainment
An abbreviated campaign is entertaining but limited in scope, while the subsequent pursuits are tailored to a satisfying (if glacial) curve of powering up

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Bungie/Vicarious Visions **Release** May 8 **Rating** T

As a smaller expansion in both size and price, my expectations for Warmind were modest, in keeping with similar prior expansions offering a few new missions and locations to explore. And while the campaign missions are all too brief, there's nonetheless a lot here for hobbyist players to enjoy. This isn't the expansion that fully resolves Destiny 2's flagging long-term engagement problem, but it admirably moves many aspects of play in the right direction, and offers abundant reasons for faithful players to log in on a day-to-day basis.

The conclusion of Destiny 2's core game brought a shift in the status quo for humanity's Guardians, and Warmind continues the story trend begun with Curse of Osiris, offering follow-through on that moment. The Traveler's awakening has stirred two sleeping giants in the polar ice caps of Mars, and dire consequences are promised if we don't confront the threat at hand. Warmind's story missions are fun to play through, but the ambitious scope of the narrative doesn't have the time it needs to establish credibility or drama; almost as soon as the threat is introduced, I've shot it, it's dead, and there's no reason to care anymore.

That's why I was happily surprised that so much fiction, context, and secrets lurked in the post-campaign loop. Warmind applies the philosophy that served The Taken King expansion of the original game so well, embedding hidden weapons, cryptic caches, and nuggets of lore across the Mars landscape, helping exploration feel meaningful and mysterious. That new exotic Sparrow vehicle is far more memorable because of the scattered data fragments that led to its discovery, and the details hinted about its creator. On a broader level, the Hellas Basin of Mars is a superb new destination, juxtaposing impressive ice caverns against a massive research facility, with lots of nooks and crannies to uncover.

Warmind goes to great pains to encourage long-term daily and weekly investment from its players, but the full progression system needs a more dramatic overhaul to be at its best. In particular, rewards are not currently commensurate with the effort involved in achieving them, especially in some particularly challenging (if mostly enjoyable) content like heroic strikes. Across the game, several methods of boosting character power have been tweaked or eliminated, leading to a painfully tedious grind. Endgame activities like the new Spire of Stars raid lair and Escalation Protocol have been tuned to be extremely challenging – a good or bad thing depending on your level of commitment – but there's no doubt that the pool of potential players for those activities is smaller than it could be as a result.

The Escalation Protocol wave-based PvE event is the clearest example of a smart idea that isn't reaching its potential. These big public space fights can be thrilling, but the absence of meaningful matchmaking or grouping options mean it's rare that a full team is even present to confront the challenge, and the event is often failed almost as soon as it has begun. As more people reach higher power levels this should improve, but once again, some of Destiny 2's best content is being obscured by an unwillingness to embrace structured grouping of varied sizes.

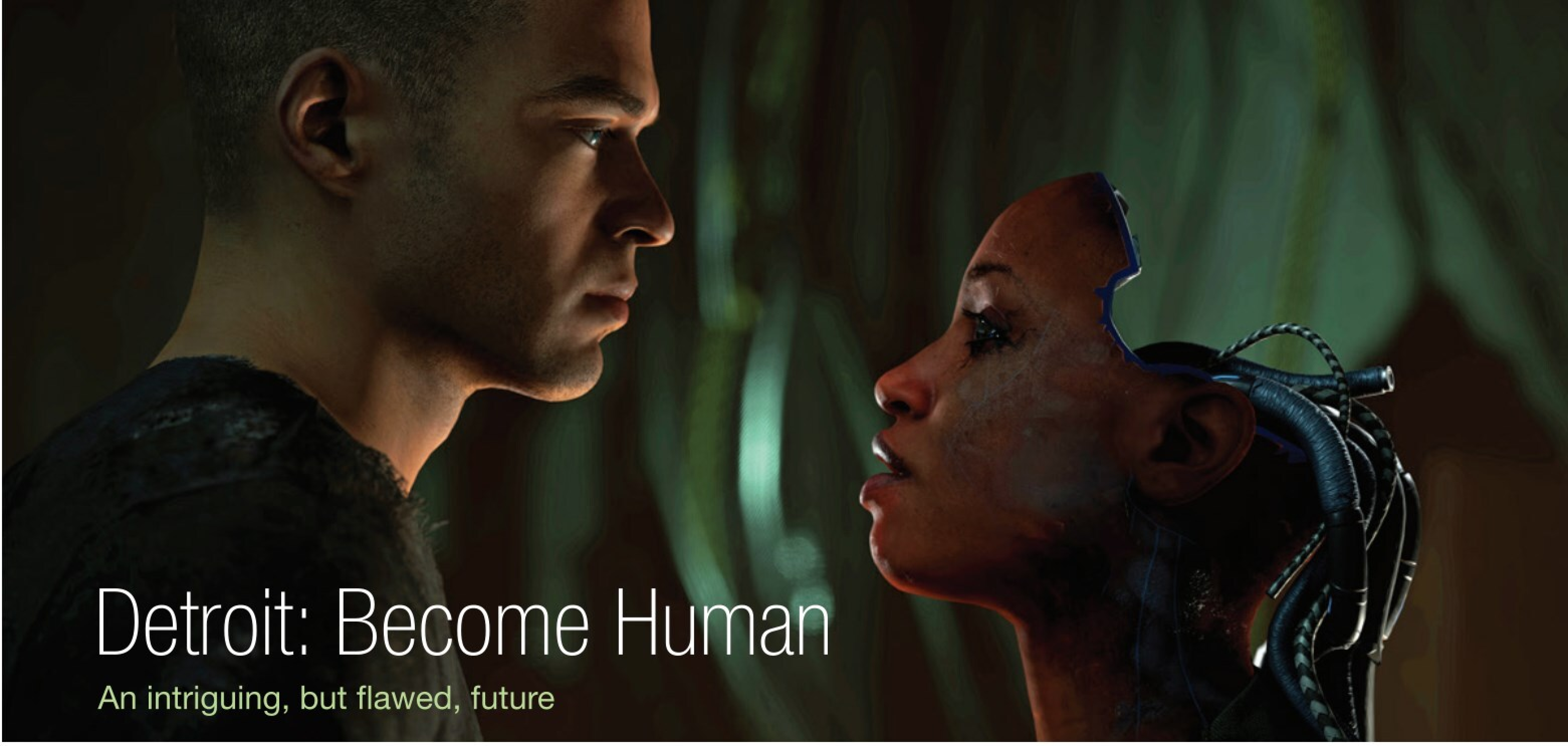
The Crucible is in a comparatively good place right now, with strong balance between weapon types and subclasses. The variety of game types expanded over the course of last season through Rumble and 6v6 Iron Banner, and along with the addition of a couple of strong new maps with Warmind, the variety in playspaces and activities is at a high point. A dual ranking system rewards both consistent play (valor) and skill (glory), though the latter may make the higher-tier competitive playlist even more insular and unfriendly to those who are wanting to give it a shot. The return of private matches is excellent news, even if it was a bit confounding that it wasn't included in the base game last fall.

Contentious issues around the prevalence of team-shooting, weapon slot structure, and time-to-kill are still hot topics among the vocal upper echelon of Destiny 2's community; these are serious issues, but I'm also sensitive to the developer seeking a middle ground between addressing those complaints, and maintaining an environment that isn't punishing for the average player. It's safe to say that we're looking at a work-in-progress as the Crucible continues to be revised.

New weapons and armor are always exciting, but the real star of the show this time is the newly reinvigorated exotic weapons. While a few stinkers remain, many of the exotic weapons finally feel epic and powerful. I face a genuinely difficult choice as I weigh the merits of the black hole-slinging Graviton Lance or the explosive Sunshot hand cannon, and that's the way it should be.

While I'm not ever going to be a fan of the microtransactions, Warmind does a better job of telegraphing the nature of these mostly cosmetic rewards, and offering increased opportunities to find some of them from activities. In a game that is currently suffering from a dearth of fun rewards for day-to-day play, that practice should be increased; public events, world chests, patrols, strikes, and Crucible matches would be improved with a higher chance of some of these appealing cosmetics in the loot pool.

Warmind effectively rounds out Destiny 2's first year, and represents a franchise in a strange period of transition. The game seeks to maintain some of its successful new features, like better destinations and clan integration, even as it simultaneously tries to recapture some of the magic and investment that characterized its predecessor. The weapon is aiming at the right target, and now it just needs to hit that precision shot. » **Matt Miller**



Detroit: Become Human

An intriguing, but flawed, future

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Quantic Dream **Release** May 25 **Rating** M

As a society, we're constantly turning to technology to relieve our burdens, and we become increasingly dependent on it. With the creation of self-driving cars and robots to attend to our needs, we must wonder how these advancements will shape our society going forward. Detroit: Become Human explores this interesting question, presenting a world where androids are prisoners to our demands. The premise is engrossing, and the variety of choices is fascinating. They're both compact and far-reaching, such as how you develop a relationship, or which questions you ask. The result is an experience that leaves you thinking.

Quantic Dream paints a horrifying look at the future, showing humans using and abusing machines at every turn. You experience this firsthand as you take control of three different android protagonists, all with different things at stake and relationships to consider. Kara must protect a child named Alice from her abusive father. Connor must hunt his own kind – androids with errors making them display emotion. The weakest of the three arcs is Markus', the leader of an android uprising. A look at Markus' previous life as the caretaker of an elderly man is well done, but when he takes on his leadership role, it falls flat with predictable speeches and black-and-white decisions.

The writing is at its best in the little moments that develop the relationships. Connor works with Hank, a police detective who hates androids, and Hank often busts his chops, making for fun interactions. In addition, watching an android like Kara having to decide what example she sets for Alice works well. Do you teach her about this harsh world where you sometimes have to do bad things to survive, or do you always do the right thing, even if it puts you in a dire situation?

Watching these bonds form is the highlight of the game, but the overall narrative has issues impossible to ignore. Its self-stated parallels to history, such as slavery and civil war, are too heavy-handed, making it come across as disingenuous. I felt uncomfortable with how much it draws comparisons to the Civil Rights Movement; this fictional battle obviously doesn't have the same stakes as the real-life oppression it mirrors, and the way it is used as a crutch further cheapens the struggle.

When I played Detroit, I was captivated by it. But my disappointment grew as I hit some plot twists and realized how poorly certain information is explained – like how Markus has the power to convert machines and give them free will. You find plot holes regardless of the path you take, but especially in Kara's arc. I had to suspend my disbelief to enjoy Detroit for what it is – similar to previous Quantic Dream titles like Heavy Rain and Indigo Prophecy. Some important details can be uncovered by making different decisions, but hiding basic plot information behind dialogue choices players may never see is frustrating.

Even so, replaying the game and certain scenes gave me an appreciation for how far-reaching and different a playthrough can be. After you complete a segment, you are shown a grid of each variation, with the paths not taken left as blank boxes. The branching paths really shine in the latter parts of the game. Choice-driven games typically struggle with giving players enough satisfying variations, but Detroit acknowledges what you've done, like how you've built your relationships, and the split-second decisions you've made, like taking a risk during a chase scene.

The variance in choice is downright impressive, but the overall gameplay could use more variety. I can only experience so many fights, investigations, and chase scenes before they all start to bleed together. In addition, the touchpad and motion controls are unintuitive, and I hated each time they appeared, because I knew it could mean failing a sequence and having to deal with consequences for something that didn't feel like my fault. Quantic Dream explores a new element unseen in their previous choice-based games, where you can use Markus' special power to calculate movement ahead of time, seeing what success or failure would look like for your next action. I like this idea, as it prevents fail conditions based on arbitrary decisions like which way to jump.

Detroit made me think about topics I've avoided about humanity and our future, and that's a good thing. These are hard issues to explore, and Detroit both succeeds and stumbles in that respect. Its biggest assets are the relationship building and expansive branching paths. I keep coming back to explore its variations. The overall message about technology and our future lingers long after the credits roll. » **Kimberley Wallace**

8

PS4

» **Concept**
Explore a near-future in which humans have exploited androids for their own needs, and decide how far you'll go to change the status quo

» **Graphics**
Impressive, lifelike visuals make the world and people feel real. The character models especially stand out for their realistic mannerisms and detail, right down to the pores and facial hair

» **Sound**
The vocal performances are outstanding, especially Clancy Brown as Hank. Whether it's an intense chase scene or a reflective moment, the music sets the tone wonderfully

» **Playability**
Quick-time events dominate the game to great effect, even if occasional motion controls get annoying. You can get rid of these by changing difficulty levels, which also allows you to adjust time limits and the complexity of button presses

» **Entertainment**
Despite some shortcomings in its dialogue and plot, Detroit: Become Human tells an engaging story about humanity and technology while allowing your choices to shape the experience

» **Replay Value**
High

Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze

Don't miss it this time

9.25

Switch

» Concept
Bring the excellent, but underplayed, Tropical Freeze to the Switch with a new playable character that basically functions as an easy mode

» Graphics
Tropical Freeze looked great in HD when it debuted in 2014, and the transition to Switch went well. The fur physics stand out in particular

» Sound
Thanks to the return of the SNES games' original composer, David Wise, Tropical Freeze's soundtrack hits all the right nostalgic notes. The new stuff is great, too

» Playability
Moving the Kong family, pounding the ground, and rolling into a jump all feel great. Even swimming works well, though it's not as fun as running and jumping

» Entertainment
Tropical Freeze stands among the best platformers of the last decade. Playing as Funky Kong is great for alleviating frustration or allowing skilled players to breeze through the game at high speed

» Replay Value
Moderately high

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Retro Studios **Release** May 4 **Rating** E

When Tropical Freeze released on the Wii U in 2014, it was exciting because it marked Donkey Kong Country's belated entry into the world of high definition. It played well, included tons of nostalgic and novel platforming ideas, and offered a significant, but fair challenge. Unfortunately, simply by the nature of its underperforming platform, not many people played it. The Switch re-release offers a chance for those who skipped the Wii U to play a fantastic platformer, but even for those who played it four years ago, there is at least one incentive to make a return trip to Donkey Kong Country.

The transition from Wii U to Switch by the original developer, Retro, is seamless. The platforming is accurate and fast, the resolution improves from 720p to 1080p when docked, and the soundtrack is worth the effort of seeking out headphones.

The big addition for the Switch version is the inclusion of a playable Funky Kong, which changes the experience in some significant and fun ways. Tropical Freeze is hard, and if you want to play the difficult-but-fair original version, you can. Playing as Funky Kong, however, functions as an easy mode. He has more hearts and does not take damage from spike pits. He can also roll infinitely, breathe underwater, double-jump, and perform a floating drop. He's a combination of some of the distinguishing abilities of the other playable Kongs, and it makes it all much easier. If you found Tropical Freeze too difficult, Funky makes the challenge much more manageable, which is great for young or impatient players.

For skilled players, however, Funky is a speed-runner's dream. I have no delusions of calling myself a speed-runner, but ripping through a level using Funky Kong's infinite roll and double jump created a new type of high-speed challenge I enjoyed tremendously. It made me feel like a Donkey Kong Country expert and wonder why I ever called the original challenging. Going back to the original mode made me quickly remember, but as a returning tourist, I liked having a mode that let me quickly play through the whole game again.

The Switch version reaffirms that Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze is a fantastic platformer. Having a new character to control and a handheld version of the game is great for previous owners, but the real audience is those who missed the original release.

» Kyle Hilliard

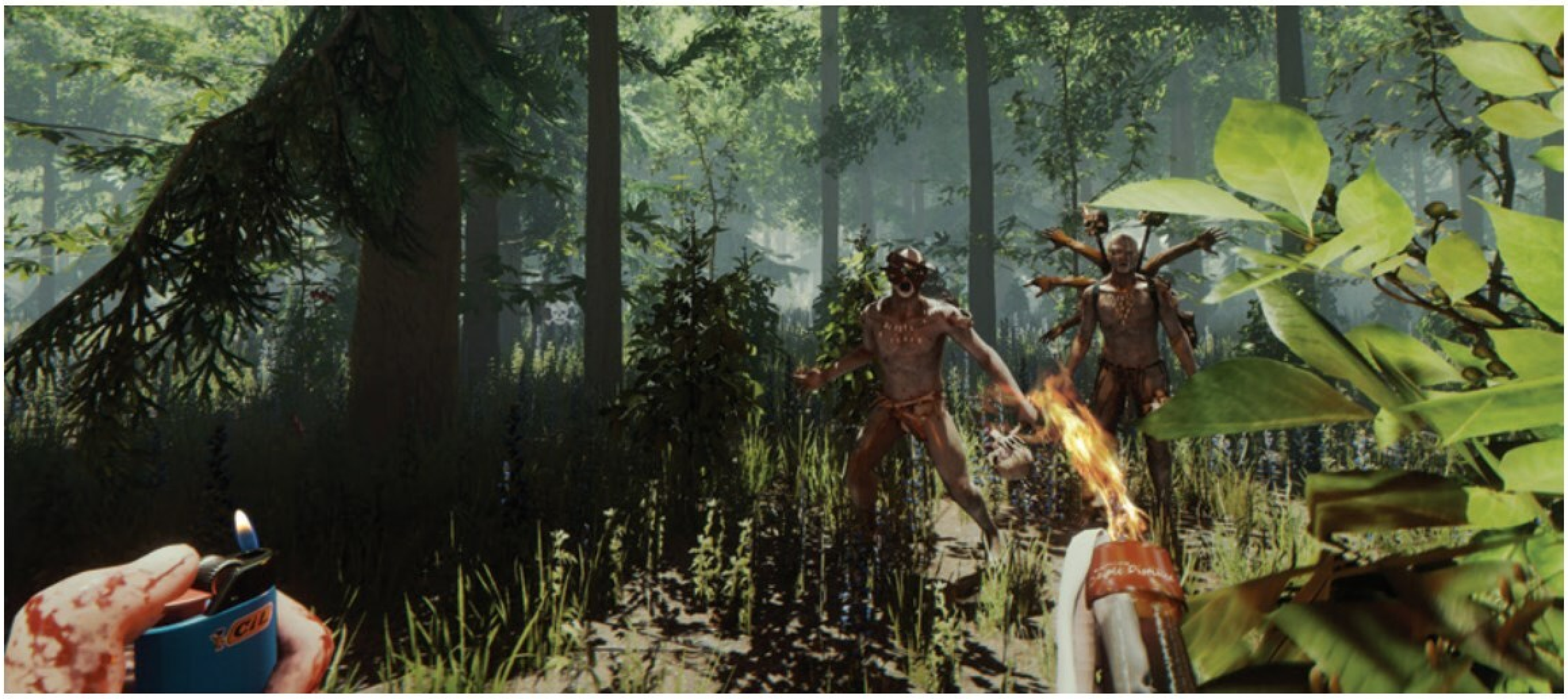
Because the original Wii U version of Donkey Kong: Tropical Freeze won our Game of the Month award in 2014, this rerelease was not eligible for the honor this month

The Forest

A gruesome champion

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Endnight Games Ltd **Developer** Endnight Games Ltd **Release** April 30 **Rating** M



The figure in the distance has spotted my camp. I know because I can hear him chittering. I move slowly to the side, hiding myself within the bushes as the humanoid approaches the bonfire near my log cabin. I consider waiting the whole thing out but realize he'll just bring a war party to my doorstep if I let him leave. I creep up behind him. He turns just in time to get an axe to the face. My camp and I are now both safe. And, moreover, I also finally have a grisly meal for dinner.

The Forest is a perverse, often grotesque game, delving into themes of abuse, cannibalism, and what it means to survive in a meaningless world. It's also never boring. The game puts you in the shoes of a father who's crash-landed on a mysterious island. Your job is to survive long enough to find your son, as well as the other passengers of the plane, which is easier said than done.

Many entries in the survival genre often feel like grinding acts of repetition to satisfy various meters. While The Forest does have those survival staples, the game avoids frustration by presenting them in consistently interesting ways. For example, instead of a generic crafting menu, you're presented with a giant blanket that reveals all of your inventory items. In the center of the blanket is your crafting area, where you drag various items to combine them into something better making the crafting process feel more intimate.

Despite my weariness at the idea of playing yet another survival game filled with hunting resources and building structures, I soon fell in love with the core loop of The Forest. The structures you can build are predominantly wooden and thus draw from the same currency, meaning you don't have to chase 20 different kinds of rocks. This makes building your first base a quick, satisfying quest. Every structure has a useful and defined purpose. Your cabin gives you shelter but you need other structures too, like the rack, which lets you dry out the meat you harvest so it never spoils and you can carry it with you anywhere. You can also use a turtle shell to build a water collector that holds rain droplets and sticks to make rabbit traps and cages. All of the survival elements of The Forest are satisfying, especially in how well-tuned they are, but they become special when they coalesce with the horror elements.

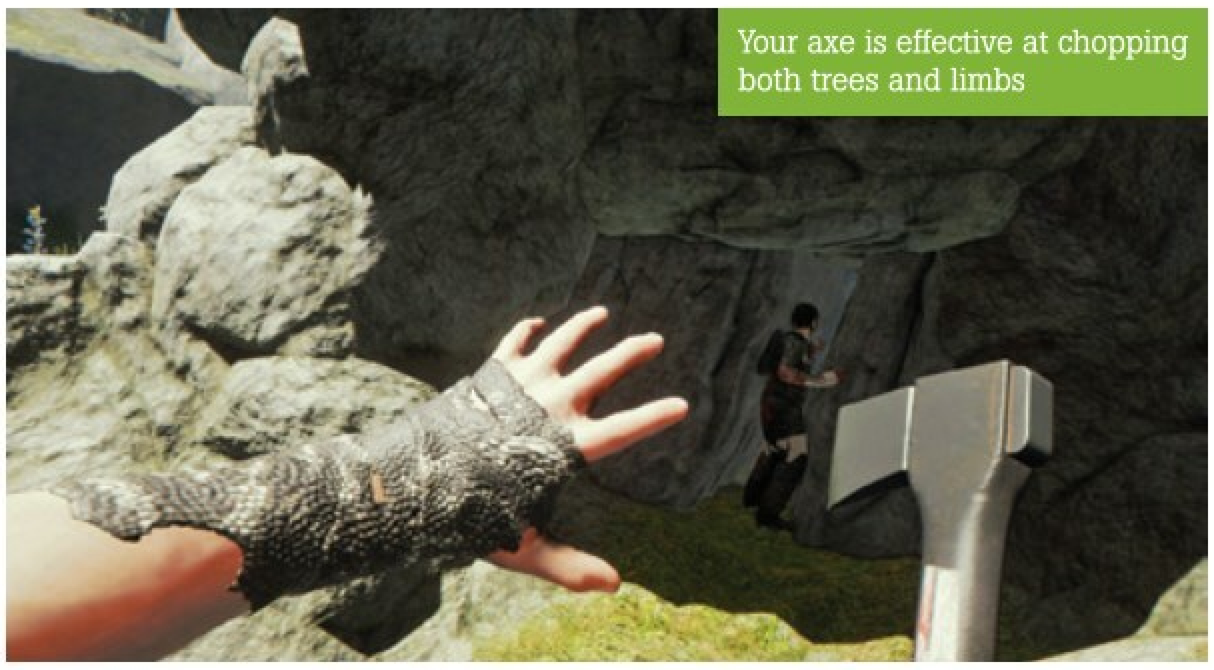
The Forest is about more than just survival, as there's a story for you to progress through. You do this by discovering various caverns littered throughout the hand-crafted island. Spelunking into them, you find narrative clues like keycards for hidden doors, the bodies of your fellow passengers, and the helpful resources they've left behind. Every underground jaunt is terrifying as you start out with only a finicky lighter to show the way forward and help you spot cannibals, as well as other nasty surprises that lay waiting for you in the dark.

Once I was belaying down a dark cavern. I used my lighter to get a look around, and suddenly saw the decimated face of a corpse swinging gently in the space next to me, a rope around his waist. This was not an on-the-rails moment, but instead one I found through playing with the game's systems. It's the sort of experience that pops up over and over again during the course of the campaign. This experience feels like the pitch-perfect video game adaptation of *The Descent* that I never knew I wanted.

The highest praise I can give The Forest is just how natural the game ties together. A lot of emergent storytelling games often end up having a novelty that overstays its welcome by the end. The Forest often succeeds in instilling terror because its A.I. is legitimately unpredictable. The cannibals don't just surge at you. After a feint attack, they'll laugh and run past you, like some sick juvenile joke. Often they'll peek at you from afar and then turn back after sizing you up, returning with an entire group 10 minutes after you've already forgotten about them.

The Forest is a triumph, both for the survival genre as well as gruesome horror. It gives players just the right amount of freedom to enjoy the challenge of this hellish nightmare.

» **Javy Gwaltney**



Your axe is effective at chopping both trees and limbs

9

PC

» **Concept**
After crash landing on a mysterious island filled with hellish monstrosities, you must find your son and fellow missing passengers

» **Graphics**
The environments are captivating and enemy models are terrifying in their grotesqueness

» **Sound**
The Forest's great sound design has you wondering if that leaf crunch you just heard was a innocuous squirrel or something far worse

» **Playability**
A complicated game of scavenging and survival is made easier thanks to a helpful tutorial and generous resources given to the player

» **Entertainment**
Whether you're building a camp on the island or searching for clues to your son's whereabouts in dark and dangerous caverns, The Forest is a fantastic horror thrill ride

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Pillars Of Eternity II: Deadfire

The lure of exploration

8.75

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Versus Evil, Obsidian Entertainment **Developer** Obsidian Entertainment **Release** May 8 **Rating** M

PC

» Concept
Explore the high seas in this well-written mash-up of classic fantasy and pirate swashbuckling

» Graphics
Isometric RPGs have never looked better than the gorgeous backdrop and eye-catching spell effects on display in the Deadfire Archipelago

» Sound
Abundant and diverse voice work sets the island atmosphere, and whether it's soaring orchestral score or original sea shanties belted out by your crew, the music always accentuates gameplay

» Playability
Flexible difficulty options, smartly designed UI, and battles that are easier to read at a glance than the predecessor, even if the ship battles are a little lacking

» Entertainment
A richly imagined seafaring setting lends novelty to what is ultimately an evolved iteration of very traditional isometric RPG fun

» Replay Value
Moderately high

A strong setting can do wonders for injecting life into a franchise. The first installment of Pillars of Eternity exhibited impressive writing and gameplay, while maintaining a style of presentation and action inspired by games from almost two decades ago like Baldur's Gate. The sequel does some small but important things to evolve that traditional approach to RPGs. But it's the swashbuckling flavor of the Deadfire Archipelago that helps this new project shine, mixing magic, dragons, and mythical gods with pirates, sailing, and a lengthy quest to discover what dangers lurk beyond the horizon.

From dialogue to narrative structure, storytelling is the star of the show. Stellar, descriptive writing throughout lends a novelistic flair to the narrative. The story begins as your character's carefully curated fortress from the first game is shattered to pieces with the rise of a literal god who sets out across the sea for unknown reasons. Much of the plot that follows is a direct follow-through on that disaster, as various islands and cultures deal with the destructive passage of this skyscraper-sized being, and you seek to understand the deity's intentions. As you journey, details are relayed through written and spoken narration, providing the sense of an attending dungeon master who fleshes out the visuals with rich imagery and emotion, increasing the satisfying sense of being enmeshed in a great tabletop campaign.

Choices abound in both party interactions and the ways you choose to interact with the pirates, native cultures, trading companies, and other groups that populate the disparate islands. Obsidian has done a good job of layering in consequences to your actions and words, sometimes closing certain doors and opening others in response to dramatic decisions. I love the way the different factions evolve in response to your hard calls, and the way they each respond to you differently over time, like the pirates showing up to take me down after I allied with the native islanders. Your party members even develop relationships with each other depending on conversations overheard or choices made. If anything, I was only disappointed with the crucial final decision of the game, which felt like it left me fewer true options to change the outcome than I would have liked.

While the fiction holds your attention, it's the opportunity for exploration that pulls you forward. The game advances as you manually sail your ship between islands, cities, and forts. The sea voyaging lacks visual sophistication, but relays the idea of an-ever expanding map as the fog lifts away. On land, individual islands provide chances for battle, as well as brief narrative encounters that bring added meaning to your skill choices. Larger urban and dungeon areas are fleshed out as fully explorable isometric maps; the massive city of Neketaka is particularly well realized as a central hub to your wandering, painting a picture of conflicting cultures and decadence that looms over abject poverty and inequality. Wherever you go in the islands, dynamic weather, breathtaking environment art, and lively NPCs bring the world to life, especially through the regional patois the residents express in conversations.

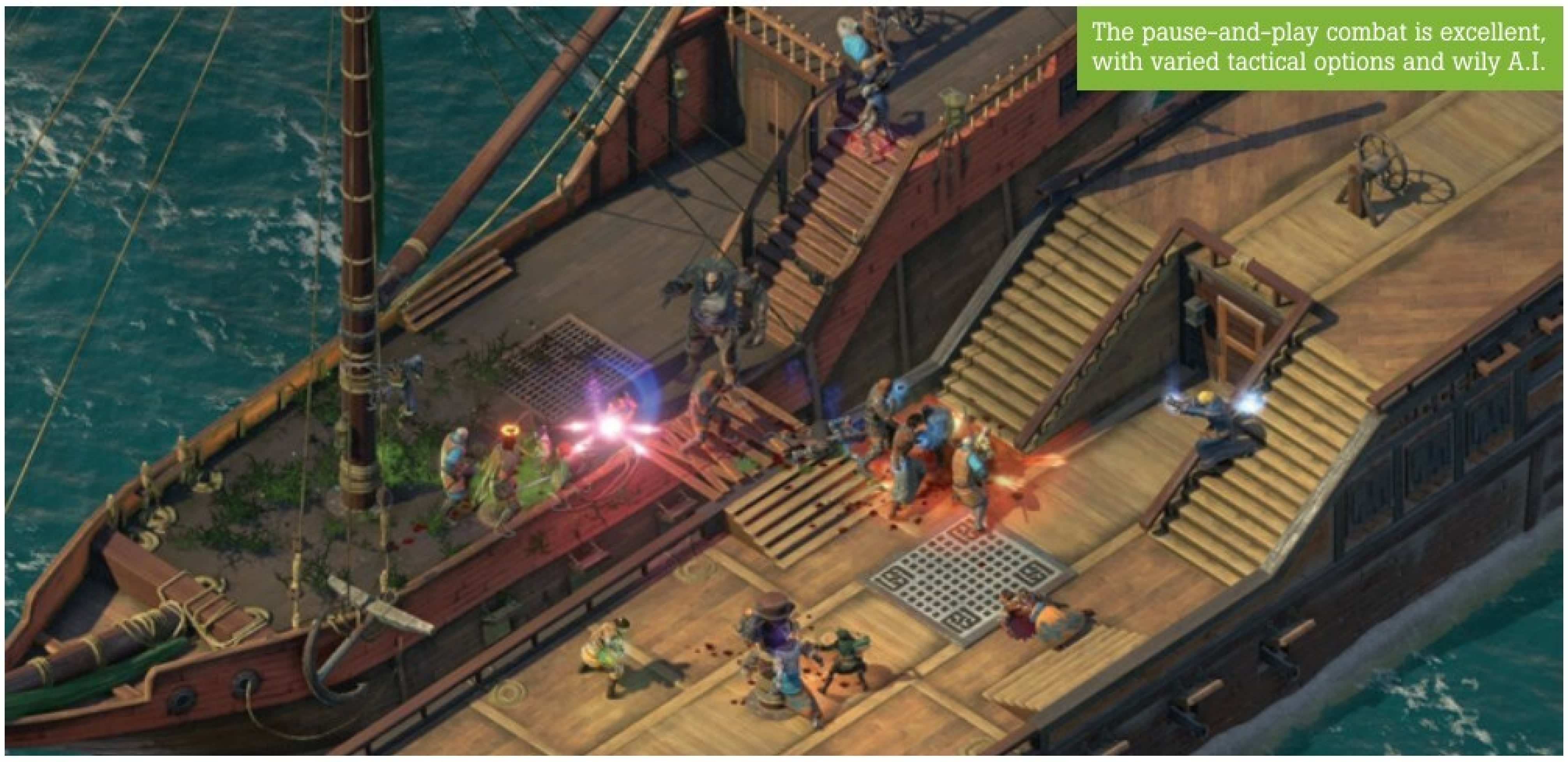
Battles can be customized to your desired level of involvement through the flexible difficulty settings. On lower tiers, battles can be mostly automated, with only occasional interjections for drastically needed healing, consumable usage, or target selection; this is a great way to enjoy Pillars II if the tactical elements don't intrigue you, but you're still fascinated by the story and choices. At higher challenge levels, the tactical puzzles are often devilish, with enemies that exploit your positioning, dramatically debuff unguarded heroes, and generally make your party have a bad day. Visual presentation has made strides since the first game, as it's easier than before to understand what's happening on screen, and the spell effects look fantastic.

Your ship is upgradeable with distinct crew, weapons, and more, and there are compelling management tasks in making sure your morale is high, ship stores are full, and repairs are handled in a timely way. Time invested in your ship is meant to pay off in the turn-based narrative battles that unfold when confronting an enemy ship. These are engaging and fun in the first few hours, but the narrative loop for ship-to-ship conflicts begins to stale, and in a long game like this, it feels like the ship combat minigame needs greater depth.

Whether I was sailing into unknown waters, or delving into an ancient volcano temple, Deadfire impressed me with the breadth of missions, side quests, party member-specific tasks, faction development, and other projects that reveal themselves over time. As more and more objectives fill the journal it can feel overwhelming, but also deeply satisfying, to slowly chip away at the available projects. In another game, some of the side content might feel phoned in; here, almost every new quest brings interesting characters, conflicts, and choices into play.

The isometric RPG has come a long way since the first Pillars of Eternity helped to usher in a resurgence for the genre in 2015. Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire hews closer to the traditions than it needs to, and some of the new concepts like ship battles simply aren't as robust as they could be. But stellar narrative structure and writing and an interesting central threat help this sequel maintain interest across the dozens of hours it takes to enjoy a robust playthrough. We also bear witness to a studio that is still at the top of its game in crafting memorable fantasy adventures.

» Matt Miller



The pause-and-play combat is excellent, with varied tactical options and wily A.I.

BattleTech

Middling mechanized mayhem

Style 1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Paradox Interactive **Developer** Harebrained Schemes **Release** April 24 **Rating** NA

7.5

The beloved MechWarrior/BattleTech IPs return to the classic strategy space loaded with giant mechanized armors and the pilots who command them. As a longtime fan of the franchise, I was pleased to see plenty of customization options for my mechs big and small, true to form with heat sinks, jump jets, and particle projection cannons (PPCs). However, frustrating gameplay elements, a plodding pace, and frequent "stress to progress" initiatives keep players in tough spots even as they attempt to acquire a bay full of combat-worthy scrap.

The core concept is simple: Bring up to four mechs (and their pilots) into a huge variety of contract encounters. The ability to select missions lets you plan your strategy – picking cold environments for your heat-heavy mechs to excel in, for instance. You also take on simple tasks to earn cash to upgrade your ship, buy weapons, purchase mechs, make repairs, and pay the constant upkeep on everything. The missions run the gamut of purported objectives, but almost always boil down to blasting your way through mechs and vehicles. This focus on meaty combat works out to be more than fine because that's the real strength of the game; if you've played other modern strategy titles like XCOM, you have the general idea of what you're going to be engaging with.

The action is fun, with enough freedom to try out many different mech configurations. I enjoyed building melee-centric mechs designed to knock opponents down and unleash flamers and machine guns, as well as long-range heat-hogs designed to take advantage of multiple lasers and PPCs. The combat and related customization options are the stars of the show, and make the tactical warfare worth diving into. Preparing perfectly for a battle and letting loose with your creations feels great, and finishing a map with a huge coffer of supplies without taking a scratch is awesome. Most of your time in BattleTech is spent in battle, and that's exactly where you want to be.

Encounters are accessible and easy to dive into, as all weapons fire by default (you can dial down and select only certain weapons to fire) and you can clearly see your hit rate. Later, you can get more complex with precision shots designed to nail critical stores of ammo or just blow the legs off a bot. While strategy games are not known for lightning-fast action, a sense of unflattering slowness permeates some missions, with actions and turns playing out across many units – especially the lengthier story encounters.

Strategy off the battlefield can be more important than on it. Your ship, upgrades, pilots, and mechs all cost tons of money, and you need to keep the lights on while attempting to keep everything upgraded to handle continually more challenging encounters. You're free to roam the galaxy taking on minor missions as much as you like, but eventually you feel the crunch of the taxman and need to push hard into story content to stay above water. It feels too oppressive at times, putting a ton of pressure on the player to take on story missions to keep mechs up to speed. Stopping to smell the roses can be devastating, especially if something goes wrong.

Having one of your mechs get randomly headshot and blown away can result in a frustrating cost that simply cannot be recovered. Saving frequently, even during a mission, is essential. "Save scumming" isn't a practice I advocate for often, but here it must be done to prevent a lucky shot that could literally bury your business in a single salvo. Beyond these design issues, I also experienced myriad crashes and freezes during gameplay that cost me big chunks of time and progress. On the flip side, if you do come up against a foe that might be too much to handle, you can attempt those headshots and hope. If they don't work, you can load the save. It isn't a great way to play, but you may feel like your playthrough is backed into a corner sometimes.

Despite some gameplay quibbles, the core loop of BattleTech – mech acquisition, customization, and combat – does a great job of adhering to the source material and providing engaging ballistic battles. Crunching an enemy core under your metal boot or scoping out a target for an enormous missile barrage is satisfying as hell, even if the frame of the title could stand for a little extra armor. » **Daniel Tack**

PC

» Concept
Forge an army of mechs and pilots on a mission to restore order to the great houses of the MechWarrior universe

» Graphics
Lacking by today's standards, but the visuals adequately display scenery, shooting, and the slamming of titanic bodies

» Sound
The sounds convey each laser and missile, with a solid accompanying score

» Playability
Anyone can jump in and easily grasp the basics, but you must pay attention to positioning, timing, and management to succeed

» Entertainment
Lumbering and flustering at times with a dry narrative, BattleTech still provides a solid strategy experience true to its roots

» Replay Value
Moderate

the score

8.25 Far: Lone Sails

Platform PC **Release** May 17 **Rating** NR

Far: Lone Sails is the kind of game that sticks with you after seeing credits. It delivers a fascinating mystery in a strange land with engaging puzzles, and couples that with a relationship between the player and their oversized mode of transportation. – Kyle Hilliard

6.25 39 Days To Mars

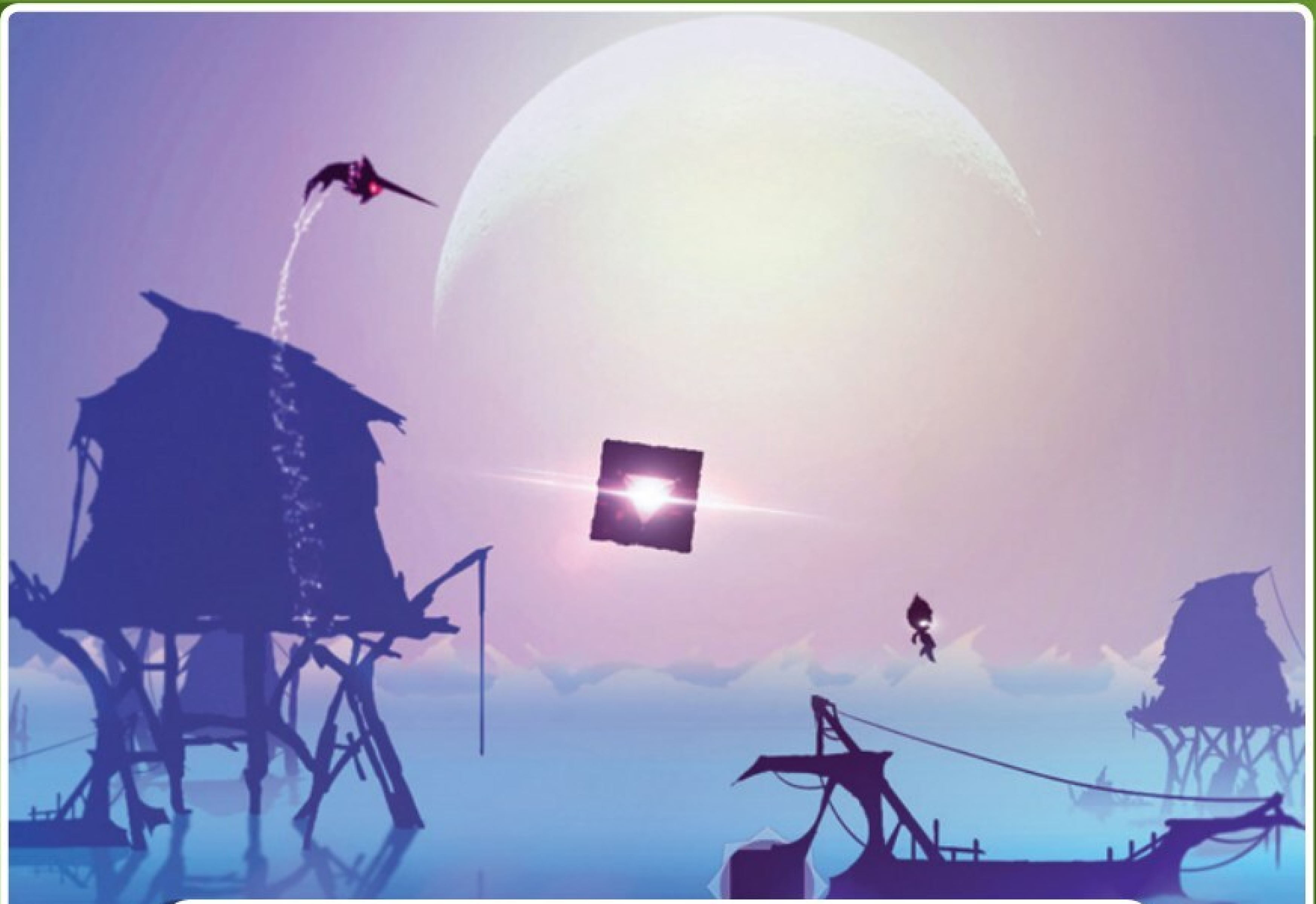
Platform PC **Release** April 25 **Rating** NR

39 Days to Mars does a better job of relaying comedy through gameplay than most games, but the "jokes" it tells aren't worthwhile. Little is terrible about the core concept or its execution (aside from the awful single-player mode), but nothing is outstanding or notable, either. – Suriel Vazquez

7.75 City Of Brass

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** May 4 **Rating** E10+

Whipping yet another skeleton into a spike pit or sending a fireball back into a sorceress' face becomes dull. Still, it takes a while to get to that point, and those who enjoy building an intimate understanding of a games' mechanics and learning to master them will find a lot to enjoy with City of Brass. – Javy Gwaltney



7.25 Light Fall

Platform Switch, PC, Mac **Release** April 26 **Rating** E10+

Light Fall draws you in with its stylistic visuals and the promise of a new twist on a classic formula. Creating your own platforms is fun, but Bishop Games didn't develop this gimmick into a meaningful series of mechanics. – Ben Reeves

6 Super Daryl Deluxe

Platform PS4, Switch, PC **Release** April 10 **Rating** T

I enjoy the combat, humor, and the checklist structure of the quests, but the nondescript method by which you complete some missions mars the experience. Super Daryl Deluxe features multiple good ideas, but the execution is limited in its success. – Brian Shea

7.25 The Swords Of Ditto

Platform PS4, PC, Mac, Linux **Release** April 24 **Rating** E10+

I love seeing how the world changes based on how I did as the prior hero, but much like The Swords of Ditto's name implies, the playthrough are too similar to feel like unique, standalone legends. – Brian Shea

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STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com
Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com
Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com
Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com
Senior Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com
Senior Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com
Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com
West Coast News Editor
Imran Khan imrankhan@gameinformer.com
PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com
Digital Editor
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com
Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Senior Associate Editors
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Associate Editors
Javy Gwaltney javy@gameinformer.com
Elise Favis elisefavis@gameinformer.com
Suriel Vazquez surielvazquez@gameinformer.com
Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com
Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com
Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Graphic Designers
Samm Langer sammlanger@gameinformer.com
Jen Vinson jenifervinson@gameinformer.com

Web Designers/Programmers
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Kristin Williams kristinwilliams@gameinformer.com
Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com
Video Editor
Leo Vader leovader@gameinformer.com
Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com
Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paul@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Borm rob@gameinformer.com
Advertising Sales Director
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Senior Advertising Sales Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com
Advertising Manager
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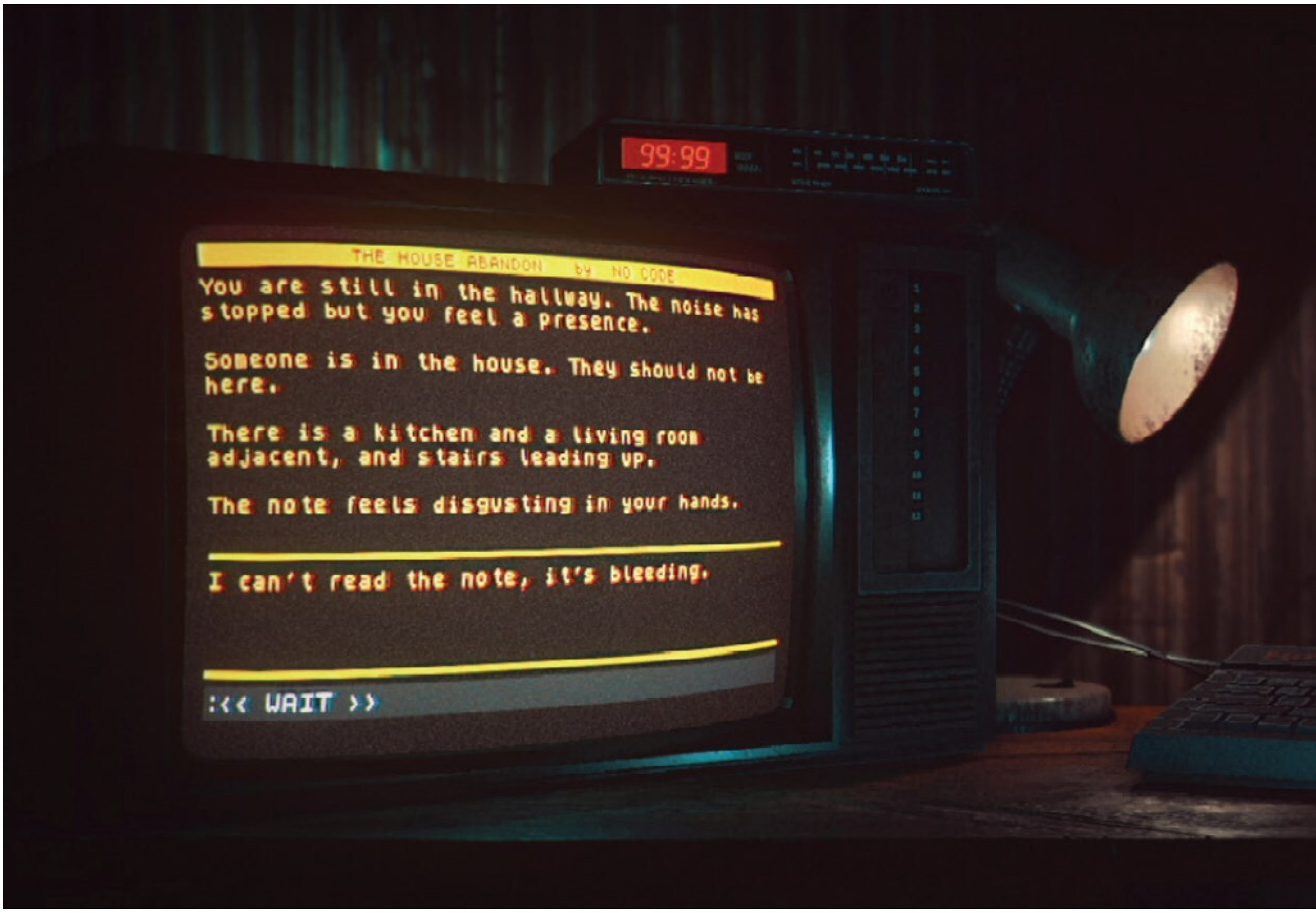


THE HOUSE ABANDON by NO CODE

You are still in the hallway. The noise has stopped but you feel a presence.

Someone is in the house. They should not be here.

There is a kitchen and a living room adjacent, and stairs leading up.

The note feels disgusting in your hands.

I can't read the note, it's bleeding.

:<< WAIT >>

The Text Adventure

The rise, fall, and rebirth of gaming's first labyrinths

by Javy Gwaltney

Long before pixelated odysseys like Final Fantasy, The Legend of Zelda, and Escape From Monkey Island began peoples' love affairs with getting lost in digital words, there was only a black screen and a hell of a lot of words.

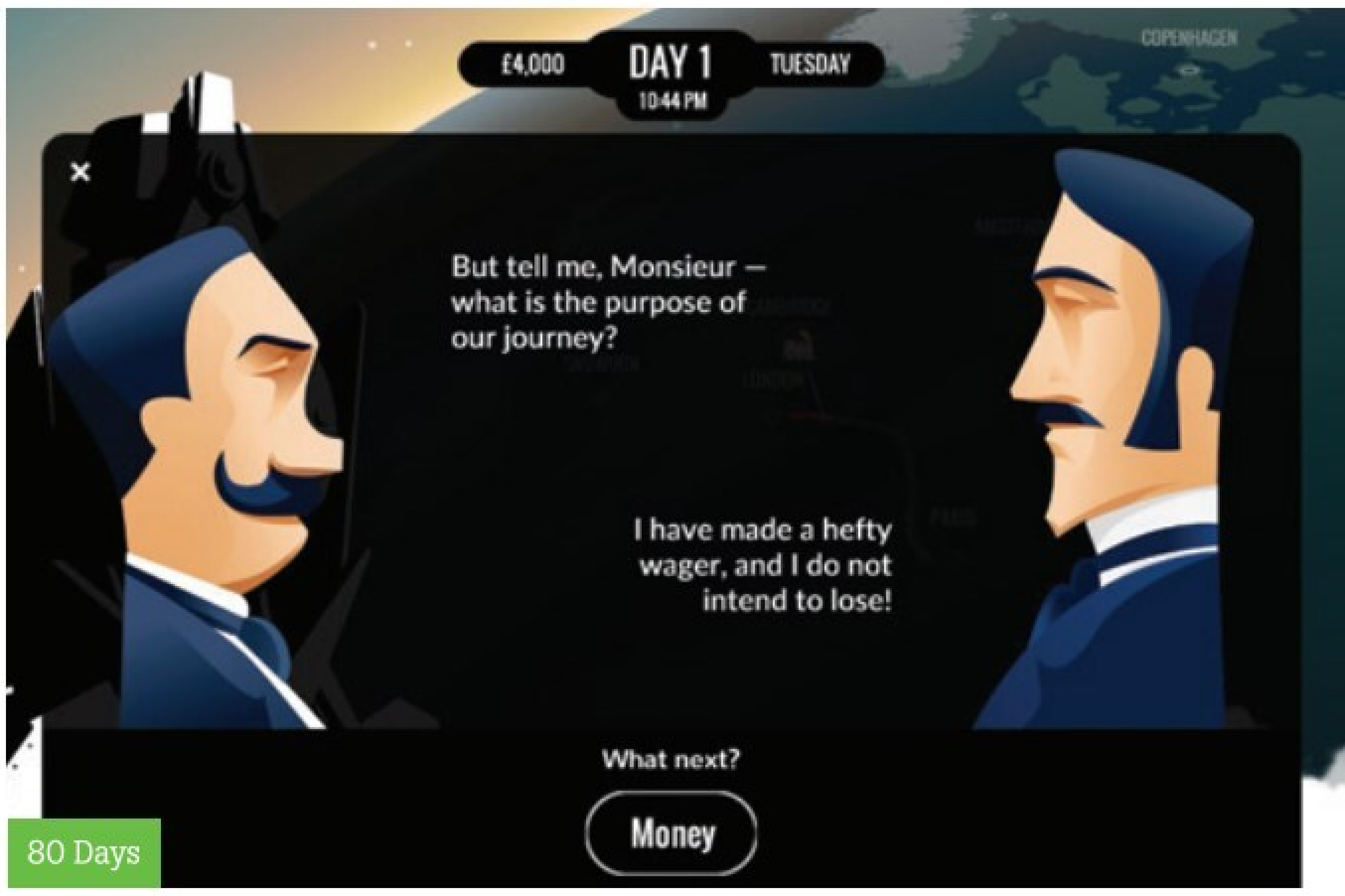
It all began in the late '70s when programmer Will Crowther wanted a way to connect with his daughters following his divorce. An avid cave explorer, Crowther built a simple text-based game inspired by Dungeons & Dragons to play with them. Called Colossal Cave Adventure, the game put players in the role of an explorer searching for treasure. By modern standards, it's woefully outdated and frustrating to play, with a cumbersome inventory-management system and only a few commands the player could use to navigate the adventure. However, Colossal Cave Adventure was a working prototype that proved you could have narrative-driven interactive experiences set in fantastical settings.

A few years later, a group of MIT students expanded on Crowther's model, creating a similar text adventure steeped in Tolkien-inspired fantasy that was much more complex when it came to commands and inventory. This game – Zork – was a commercial success, selling a quarter of a million copies in 1984. Players all over the world fell in love with its unique setting, "the ruins of an ancient empire lying far underground," as well as the game's quirky sense of humor driven by a narrator that berated you if you cursed or did something dumb. Zork responded to your actions in a way that made it feel like a living, breathing thing, with you taking center stage in an adventure that could end with you trotting out of the empire with riches galore or being devoured by the dreaded grue.

"Text adventures were literally the first true 'narrative-driven' games, says No Code's Jon Mckellen. No Code's Stories Untold, a game that combined the classic text-adventure format with 3D spaces to create a spine-tingling anthology of text-driven horror games, found both critical and commercial success last year. "Really, all we've done is replace the description text with visuals, and the interaction text with button presses."

Zork's success gave rise to the text adventure as a viable genre that was more or less monopolized by those same MIT students under a company named Infocom. While Zork continued as a series, Infocom expanded its genre ambitions well into the '80s, hiring authors and creating games that tackled Cold War fears (Trinity), Lovecraftian horror (The Lurking Horror), murder mystery (Suspect), and the far-flung future (A Mind Forever Voyaging). In 1984, Infocom even managed to rope in author Douglas Adams to

Stories Untold

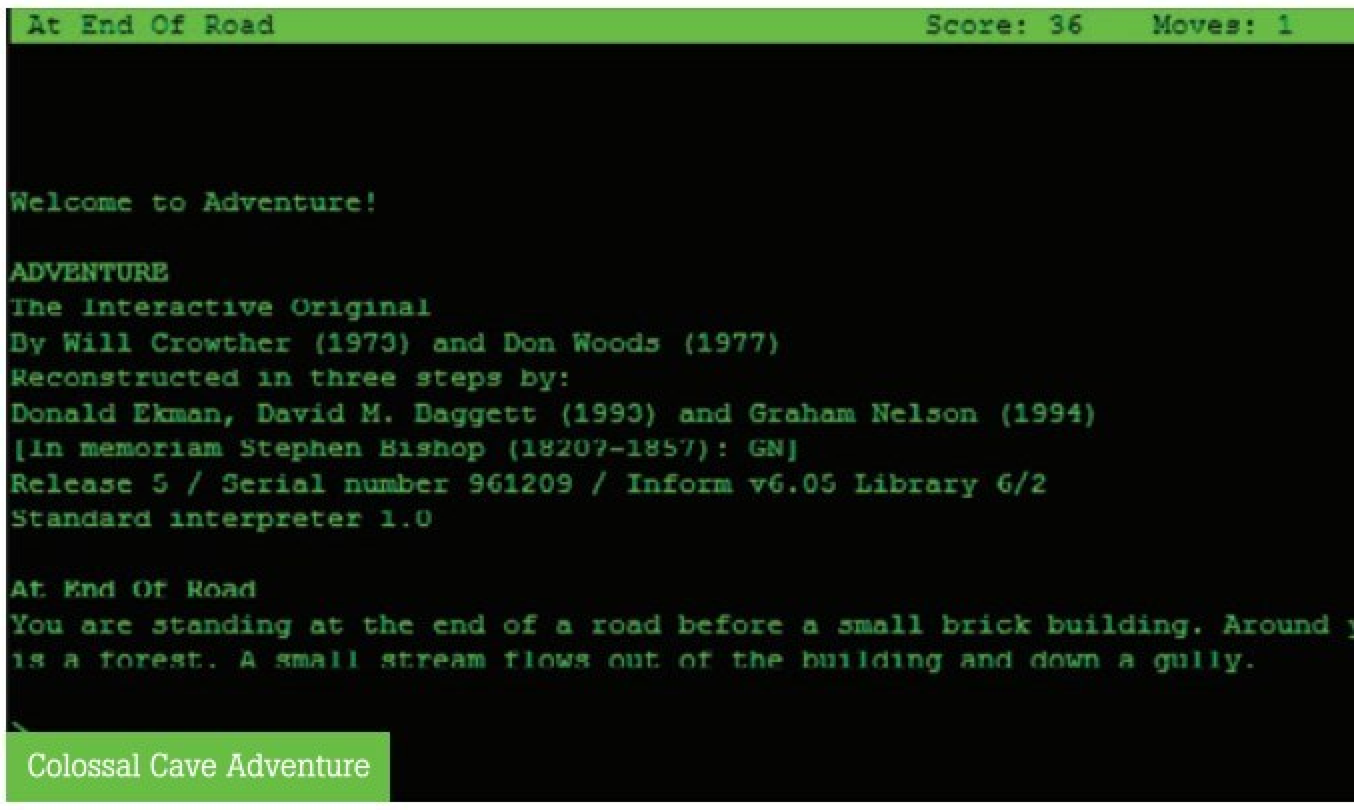


But tell me, Monsieur – what is the purpose of our journey?

I have made a hefty wager, and I do not intend to lose!

What next?

80 Days



```
At End Of Road                                    Score: 36    Moves: 1



Welcome to Adventure!

ADVENTURE
The Interactive Original
By Will Crowther (1973) and Don Woods (1977)
Reconstructed in three steps by:
Donald Ekman, David M. Baggett (1993) and Graham Nelson (1994)
[In memoriam Stephen Bishop (1820?-1857): GN]
Release 5 / Serial number 961209 / Inform v6.05 Library 6/2
Standard interpreter 1.0

At End Of Road
You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building. Around
is a forest. A small stream flows out of the building and down a gully.
```

Colossal Cave Adventure

create a text-adventure adaptation of his famous novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, which remains infamous for its difficulty and wry sense of humor.

Though Infocom had cornered the market on this genre, the good times couldn't last. As the '80s came into full swing, so did computer graphics. Under Sierra On-Line, developers like Roberta Williams, Al Lowe, and Ken Williams worked to bring adventure games into a new visual age (branded as "Hi-Res Adventures") like Mystery House and Mission Asteroid. By the late '80s, the company had an entire catalog of classic graphical adventures, including King's Quest, Police Quest, and the seedy Leisure Suit Larry. LucasArts' evolution of the graphical adventure genre with games like Maniac Mansion proved to be another nail in the coffin for text-based games.

Tensions with parent company Activision, poor business decisions around a costly database-management program called Cornerstone, and a failure to court an audience being wooed by colorful graphics ultimately led to Infocom's dissolution in 1989. The company's death signaled the end of the text adventure's brief reign as one of people's biggest gateways into the world of video games (alongside arcades and the burgeoning home console scene).

For a time, anyway.

Do Call It A Comeback

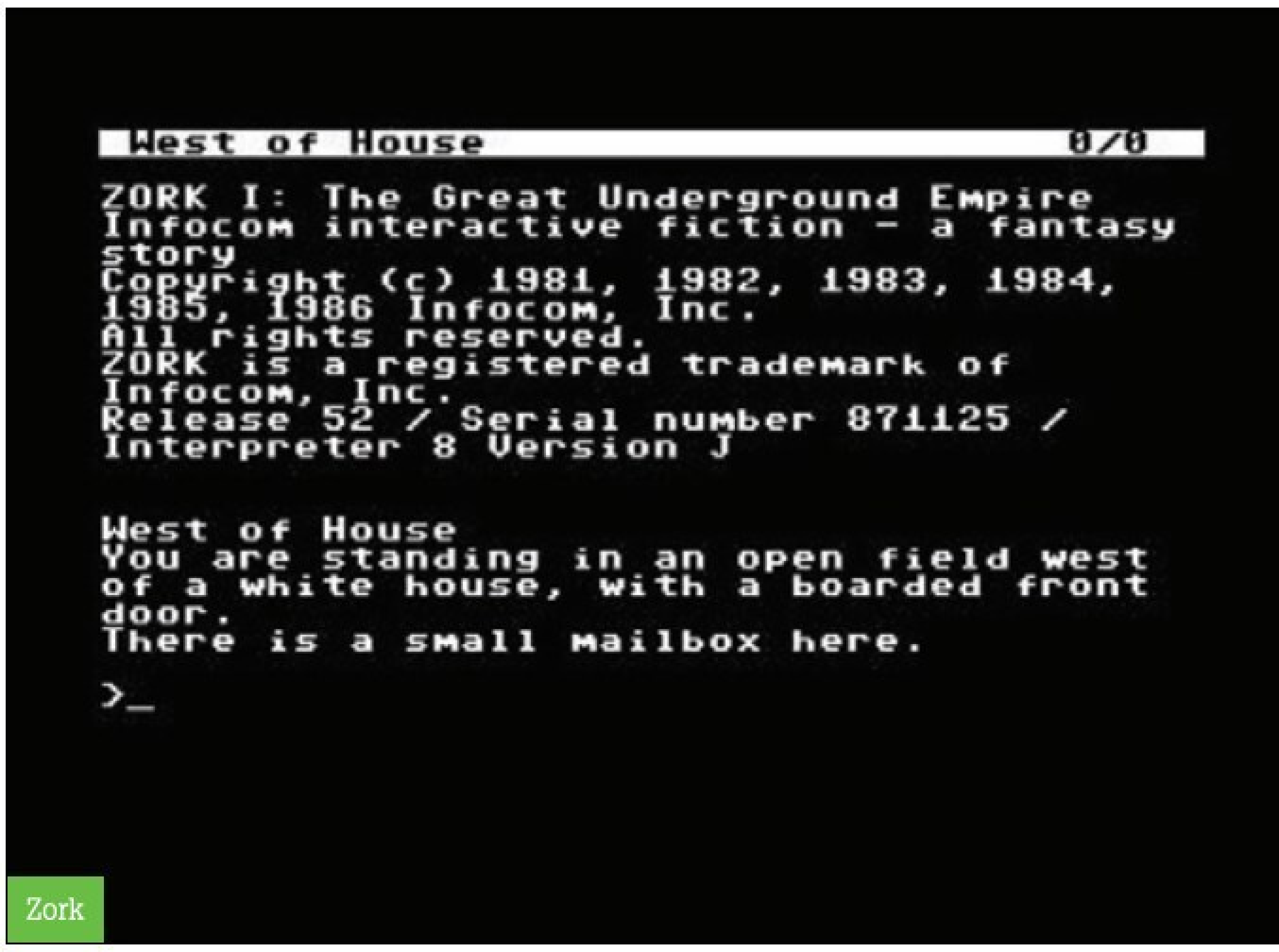
More than 20 years after its death, the text adventure came back in a big way for several reasons. Developer tools like Twine and Ink began to crop up, serving as accessible platforms anyone could use to make their own adventures. Combining these easy-to-understand tools with the digital marketplace, which was open to literally everyone, allowed games like Depression Quest and Creatures Such As We to find surprisingly large audiences.

Developers also took advantage of smartphones as the devices slowly transformed into competent gaming platforms, opening up the text adventure to a whole new audience. 80 Days, a text adventure based on *Around The World In 80 Days*, is probably the most famous and successful of these, even winning *Time*'s game of the year award for 2014.

However, Inkle's breakout hit finds itself in good company with the likes of A Dark Room and Lifeline, text adventures that have garnered a big audience on phones and PC. Some triple-A developers have even gotten in on the action, with both Dragon Age and God of War receiving official text adventure prequels.

For a long time, text adventures were thought to be a relic, spending decades in scarcity. However, their return proves they're more than just a historically important footnote, but also a growing contemporary genre. "Text adventures and interactive fiction are one of the few spaces in games where writing and design are completely intermeshed, from the very beginning – and it shows," says Meg Jayanth, the writer behind 80 Days. "There's genuinely a chance to play and innovate, and I think that's what appeals to designers and writers from the mainstream games industry."

The gaming industry's path is often uncertain and wildly unpredictable. However, given the commercial success and fan following for modern text adventures, it's safe to say the genre won't be receding into the darkness once again anytime soon. ◆



```
 West of House                              0/0
ZORK I: The Great Underground Empire
Infocom interactive fiction - a fantasy
story
Copyright (c) 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984,
1985, 1986 Infocom, Inc.
All rights reserved.
ZORK is a registered trademark of
Infocom, Inc.
Release 52 / Serial number 871125 /
Interpreter 8 Version J

West of House
You are standing in an open field west
of a white house, with a boarded front
door.
There is a small mailbox here.

>_
```

Zork

BioWare Choices: Real Or Fake?

BioWare has been making games for over 20 years. In that time, the studio has developed a reputation for allowing players to make choices that shape the outcome of various situations. Not all of these are simple good-versus-evil decisions, and some are just downright strange. Now you can test your expertise by reading the following scenarios to decide which are from actual BioWare games, and which are dumb things we made up.

by Joe Juba

1. Help a lonely weirdo reunite with the droid she loves ***OR*** Destroy the droid, but tell her it's still out there somewhere
REAL / FAKE

2. Pet the puppy ***OR*** Kick the puppy
REAL / FAKE

3. Save Ashley ***OR*** Briefly consider the alternative, then save Ashley
REAL / FAKE

4. Pay $10 for a DLC character ***OR*** Miss out on the game's best companion
REAL / FAKE

5. Upgrade your bootleg *Millennium Falcon* ***OR*** Upgrade your bootleg C-3PO
REAL / FAKE

6. Get drunk with your ship's only medical professional ***OR*** Maybe don't encourage that
REAL / FAKE

7. Should I have sex with this four-armed robot? ***OR*** Should I not have sex with this four-armed robot?
REAL / FAKE

8. Seal a frost giant's tomb with help from a mouse ***OR*** Oops, I thought you said "STEAL"
REAL / FAKE

9. Exile a tribal chief for throwing livestock at your castle ***OR*** Try training him in social graces to be a secret agent
REAL / FAKE

10. Eat a steamed bun made with "exotic meat" ***OR*** Confront the merchant, possibly a cannibal
REAL / FAKE

11. Exterminate the last of a terrifying hive-mind species ***OR*** Don't for some reason
REAL / FAKE

12. Make a baby with a witch ***OR*** Let the witch make a baby with your friend
REAL / FAKE

13. Help the disembodied consciousness of the noble first emperor ***OR*** Kill it for a pretty good medallion
REAL / FAKE

Answers: 1-Real, 2-Fake, 3-Real, 4-Real, 5-Fake, 6-Real, 7-Fake, 8-Fake, 9-Real, 10-Fake, 11-Real, 12-Real, 13-Fake

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